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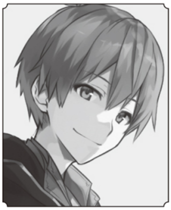
Author
Riku Nanano
Illustrator
cura
Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
The Lightning Wolf and Upheaval in the Kingdom

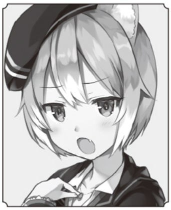
Characters



Private tutor to the dukes' daughters/
Brain of the Lady of the Sword

Allen

Tina, Ellie, Lynne, and Stella's private tutor possesses an extraordinary command of magic, although he remains oblivious to his talents.

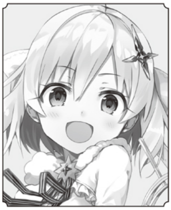


Royal Academy
student council vice president

Caren

Allen's younger sister by adoption is levelheaded but surprisingly needy. Stella and Felicia are her best friends.

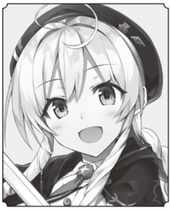
Ducal House of Howard, northernmost of the Four Great Dukedoms



Duke Howard's
second daughter

Tina Howard

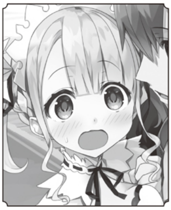
After her talents blossomed thanks to Allen's tutoring, this young lady placed first on her Royal Academy entrance exam.



Duke Howard's eldest daughter/
Royal Academy
student council president

Stella Howard

Tina's serious and hardworking elder sister is the heir to the Dukedom of Howard.

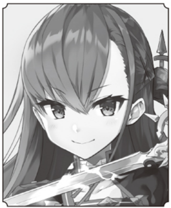


Tina's personal maid

Ellie Walker

The granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants to the House of Howard, acts as a mediator in Tina and Lynne's frequent spats.

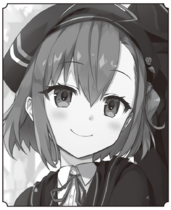
Ducal House of Leinster, southernmost of the Four Great Dukedoms



Duke Leinster's eldest daughter/
Lady of the Sword

Lydia Leinster

Allen's highborn partner is a loose cannon, but she's also the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman.



Duke Leinster's
second daughter

Lynne Leinster

Lydia's younger sister placed second on her Royal Academy entrance exam. She sees Tina, who placed first, as a rival.

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Prologue

"Gentlemen, you honor me with your presence today. I am Grant Algren."

The men seated at the massive, round table straightened when I announced my name from the seat of honor. Tonight, in this secret chamber beneath my house's mountain villa on the forested outskirts of the eastern capital, the mightiest lords of the east were assembled—earls, viscounts, barons, and our own Algren knights. Every available nobleman under our banner was in attendance. The eminent assembly wanted only Haag Harclay and our martial aristocracy to make it unquestionably the mightiest force in the kingdom...yet they were currently biding their time in the royal capital under the pretext of a military exercise—with our elite Violet Order under their command.

Only when Greck, the eldest of my younger brothers, tapped his fingers on the table from his seat beside me was I snapped out of my ecstasy.

I cleared my throat before addressing my comrades. "I appreciate your response to my abrupt summons. We are here assembled to discuss none other than"—I paused for effect—"the Great Cause."

A thrill shot through the room. The Great Cause—our rebellion against our current royal dynasty, which had incessantly stripped the aristocracy of its rights—was the fruit of years of meticulous planning.

On the other side of Greck, Earl Raymond Despenser raised a hand. He was my brother's trusted confidant, and both of them would be embarking for the royal capital after this night's meeting.

"Your Highness, Duke Algren," he said hesitantly, "do you mean that you are canceling our plans due to the recent incident in the eastern capital?"

"No, I do not," I replied. "Greck."

"Yes, my duke!" my brother shouted, rising on my signal.

The deep violet uniform that Greck wore accentuated his frame

—slender, yet well-muscled after his days commanding troops near the royal capital. I had not seen him in some time, and I could not but marvel at the majestic figure that he cut. Truly, here stood a legitimate heir to the Algren name—a far cry from our younger brothers Gregory and Gil, in whose veins ran lesser blood.

“Are you all listening?” Greck prefaced his explanation in a clear, carrying voice. “Gerard refused to await our orders and charged ahead alone. He fell at the hands of the knights of the royal guard and the Lady of the Sword!”

Gloom filled the air. Gerard Wainwright, once the second prince of our kingdom, had been a thoroughgoing fool. Yet when my witless father, Guido Algren, had ordered the prince confined in a house near the Four Heroes Sea, I had hoped that the royal buffoon might prove useful. Even the poorest excuse for a Wainwright was still an asset.

And so, we had clandestinely reached out to Gerard and searched out his former subordinate, the Black Knight, to guard him. The prince had agreed to be our puppet king once our plans reached fruition. To seal the pact, we had provided him with the Dagger of Fiery Serpents and a surreptitiously obtained formula for the great spell Blazing Qilin, copied from the diary of the Fire Fiend, history’s most vicious sorceress. Both relics, we had believed, were far beyond his ability to wield...but Gerard had defied our expectations by embarking on a rampage and somehow casting Blazing Qilin, with the destruction of the eastern and then the royal capital as his outrageous goal. The man had truly been mad.

The only mystery was where he had procured the funds to hire so many mercenaries.

“And in order to subdue Gerard,” Greck continued in hushed tones, “not only the Lady of the Sword and the commander of the royal guard, but the Archmage Lord Rodde Foudre and the professor assembled in the eastern capital.”

A shock ran through the highborn company. Some even teetered on the brink of terror. The likes of the Lady of the Sword and the Archmage had long been deemed freaks capable of single-handedly turning the tide of battle. Even so, the former was a mere girl; when we eventually met on the field, my victory was assured. The last two names that my brother had mentioned were the real threats—if either of them got wind of our plans, the Great Cause would likely end in failure.

"Have no fear!" Greck confidently proclaimed. "The main force of the royal guard suffered heavy losses and has already returned to the royal capital! They haven't an inkling of the link between Gerard and ourselves! My brother promised them that, once our father recovers from his illness, the two of them will personally address the matter at the royal palace in early autumn. The knights believed him and resumed their summer routine. The Lady of the Sword will leave to vacation in the south, as will the Archmage in the west and the professor in the north. They all consider this incident to be at an end."

I delivered the conclusion: "Once they have gone their separate ways, no foes will stand between us and the royal capital."

Strictly speaking, my word alone had not convinced the knights of the royal guard; I had given them a guarantee that the kingdom's elders were certain to trust. Both the professor and the Archmage had accepted it without complaint. The Church of the Holy Spirit must have been magnificently skilled at forging documents if not even the kingdom's finest sorcerers could penetrate their handiwork.

Gerard had given us only one thing—an opening. Our oafish foes believed that all was over. We would teach them their error!

The main force of the knights of the royal guard had escorted the prince to the royal capital, but his foray into great magic had scrambled his wits. He couldn't possibly reveal our secret pact. Yet there was cause for concern—a search of Earl Rupert's former residence had failed to reveal Gerard's correspondence with us, and the bodies of the Black Knight and his men were likewise unaccounted for. It seemed safe to surmise that they had escaped, and, if so, there was every chance that they would approach the central authorities, using the missing documents as leverage to secure their master's position as well as their own. If they reached the royal capital, we were doomed. Thus, before that could happen...

I drew in a deep breath and said, "We will fight for the Great Cause."

The room fell silent. Then the assembled nobles rose with a chorus of cries.

"Just what I was hoping Your Highness would say!"

"Down with the Wainwrights! No more meritocracy at the expense of order!"

"If we let their agenda go on unchecked, we might be forced to answer to commoners, immigrants from nameless families, or even those dirt-crawling beastfolk!"

"We won't let them trample on the history of our forefathers!"

Morale was extremely high. Greck and I nodded to each other, acknowledging that we were on firm footing.

The next instant, a man sitting to my right, a quarter of the way around the table from me, put up his hand. Despite his gray hair and advanced years, he had a piercing, hawklike stare and a presence that cowed all before him. "Your Highness, Lord Grant, may I speak?" he asked as a nervous atmosphere filled the room once more.

"Yes, Lord Hayden?" Greck responded.

Haig Hayden, one of fewer than ten grand knights in the kingdom and one of my house's Two Wings, the leader of our elite guard, fixed us with a glare. "Our forces are adapted for the defense of the eastern border. We have not mounted an aggressive campaign in two hundred years—not since the War of the Dark Lord, in fact. As a result, we must take exceptional care to maintain our supply lines if we hope to launch one now. I believe that I have already requested as much of Your Highness. Moreover, given the great distance to the royal capital, I have concerns about the reliability of our communication network."

My fool of a father had trained Haag and Haig. Both old men merited careful scrutiny. They claimed to have thrown in their lot with us because they opposed the royal family's ongoing promotion of lesser nobles, commoners, and—below the surface—even immigrants and beastfolk under the guise of meritocracy. But I found their explanation difficult to swallow. Most tellingly, the dotards refused to acknowledge my succession to the dukedom.

"Lord Grant"? Bah!

Greck shot me a meaning look; we hadn't intended to unveil our plans here, but needs must. "Naturally, we have taken that into account," my brother said. "Grant."

"Old Haig, your concerns are quite reasonable," I continued, "but I promise you that they shall pose no issue."

"What do you mean by that?" the old knight demanded, leveling his stern gaze on my brother and me.

You've never known your place, old man! I'll teach you that your day is done, as is Haag's and my father's!

"Conditions have changed since the War of the Dark Lord," I said, surveying the round table. "Railroads connect every major city in the kingdom. We will use trains for troop transport and supply! Great mercantile houses support our cause, and they are already stockpiling provisions. Furthermore, we will maintain close contact through the widespread adoption of long-distance magical communications. Such stratagems know no precedent anywhere on the continent. Our Great Cause shall herald a new age of warfare! Are you satisfied now, Old Haig? And need I remind you that I inherited both the Dukedom of Algren and the enchanted halberd Deep Violet, which proves my title?"

After a long silence, the old knight bowed his head and then raised it again. "Pardon my impertinent remarks, Your Highness, Duke Algren."

I felt vaguely satisfied. Haig's old mind could never have conceived of such a plan. Our other comrades were elated, as evidenced by their clenched fists and repeated nods.

"Grant, I'd like to confirm just one point as well," said a slight man in a hooded gray cloak seated on the far side of the round table, raising his hand. My second-youngest brother, Gregory Algren, wore his usual pasted-on smile.

I felt strangely irritated, but I said, "Yes?"

"Your battle plan leaves no room for doubt," he responded. "Simply superb. I have every confidence that it will meet with success in—"

"Out with it!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. What shall we do in the—admittedly unlikely—event that we encounter resistance during our pacification of the eastern capital? The response of the beastfolk, it strikes me, is an open question. There is the Old Pledge between our house and them to consider, and they deem the Great Tree—one of our objectives—to be sacred ground."

"Ha! Is that all? The answer is obvious." I sneered and sat back in my chair. How could a brother of mine—even in name only—fret over such trivialities? I recalled the cold reception that I had so recently received at the hands of Ogi, the wolf-clan chieftain and overall leader of the beastfolk.

What do we care for some moldering contract that has been gathering dust since the War of the Dark Lord?!

The gold chain of the Church of the Holy Spirit around my neck swayed pleasantly as I held my head high and clearly proclaimed, "If they offer no resistance, we shall display our merciful generosity by sparing their lives, if nothing else. If they defy us in the slightest, however, then we shall exterminate the vermin. Lesser animals should know better than to snap at humans."

Beside me, Greck clapped his hands. One by one, our comrades joined in the applause. Animosity against the beastfolk was strong; in addition to the large autonomous districts that they maintained in the east and west of the eastern capital, the beasts monopolized the Great Tree and the great profits to be derived from its fruit, branches, and leaves. The only hands not clapping belonged to Haig, his men, and the still sour-faced Gregory.

I raised my right hand for silence. "Haig, Gregory, do you still have cause for concern?"

A moment of silence passed, then Haig said, "None, now that I have heard your policy concerning compliant beastfolk."

But while the old knight backed down, my foolish brother persisted. "What of the Brain of the Lady of the Sword?" he asked. "I hear that he will remain in the eastern capital to recuperate."

The circle of nobles scoffed.

"What of him?"

"The *flunky* of the Lady of the Sword, more like!"

"A houseless wretch who weaseled his way into the Leinsters' good graces."

None, it seemed, considered the man a threat.

"Is that all?" I said dismissively. "If he frightens you, then deal with him yourself!"

"M-Me?" the shaken Gregory replied. How could he be so unlike Greck?

"Yes, you. I trust that you're capable of it?"

My half-witted brother took some time to respond. But at last, he bowed deeply and said, "Very well. I shall see to the Brain of the Lady of the Sword."

What a miserable fool. As if he and his sorcerer guards weren't already far too great a force to send against a single peasant raised by animals.

"Victory shall be ours!" I shouted, raising my right fist high. "We cannot fail! Even as we speak, mighty allies come from the east to ensure our triumph!"

"Victory shall be ours!" the assembled nobles echoed. "Down with this mad age! Long live Duke Algren!"

*

Once the fools' celebration was over, I held my hand to the door of the hidden chamber and announced myself.

"This is Konoha. Please grant me entry."

A spell formula appeared on the heavy door, forming a pattern that then slowly unraveled, as though it had a will of its own. The portal opened to reveal the gray-robed Gregory Algren within. His left hand was toying with the gold chain at his throat.

"Ah, Konoha. I've been waiting for you," he said, smiling. There was something unfathomable about this feeble man that made me shiver, but I was duty bound to keep my emotions in check.

"What do you want of me?" I asked. "My orders from His Highness, Duke Grant Algren have not changed. My mission is to monitor you."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," he replied. "Come here. This is most interesting."

I approached without another word and inspected the spot on the round table that he pointed to. There lay a map of the kingdom, dotted with glass game pieces. Violet denoted allies, while red, blue, green, and white marked enemy forces. Clear pieces apparently represented neutral territory. The area around the royal capital contained few enemies and only two large clear pieces.

"This is the anticipated distribution of forces when we launch the Great Cause," Gregory continued, still wearing his unsettling grin. "The royal capital is virtually defenseless; the royal guard suffered heavy losses in battle against the former Prince Gerard, and the royal family's personal bodyguards are skilled but few. The houses of Marquesses Gardner and Crom, which hold the territory east of the city, have chosen neutrality. The balance of power is overwhelmingly in our favor. Grant and Greck seem convinced that we can't lose."

I said nothing—chatting with this man held no appeal for me—but I agreed that the fools would probably win the early battles of the farce that they called the Great Cause. After all, they would have the Algrens' Two Wings on their side. Grand knights, the pinnacles of chivalry, were not to be taken lightly.

But the fools fatally underestimated that monster, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. They could overwhelm him with numbers, but the threat that he posed extended far beyond the battlefield. Investigating the past four years or more of his exploits had taught me how easily he accomplished the impossible.

Driving off the living disaster that was a black dragon, slaying a four-winged devil, and handily surviving even an encounter with a pure-blooded vampire were more-than-superhuman feats. And contrary to popular belief, they could not be attributed to the Lady of the Sword's might alone; her Brain's cool head and exceptional mind for tactics and strategy had been indispensable. My one and only master, Lord Gil Algren, had good reason to idolize him—loath as I was to admit it.

That monster might well be capable of reaching the truth, even with only fragmentary information to work from. He would bring disaster to the Great Cause—not that I cared what became of fools who discounted Lord Gil.

"It's probably true that the Ducal House of Lebufera and the Order of Royal Knights are too preoccupied with the armies of the Dark Lord to act," Gregory said, ignoring me as he tapped the colored glass pieces in the west, north, and south. "The Howards are staring down the Yustinian Empire, while the Leinsters have the Principalities of Atlas and Bazel to concern them. Before they can mobilize, the Algrens will take the royal capital"—he assembled violet pieces in the capital, then divided them into a northern and a southern front—"and strike the Howards and Leinsters from the rear while they engage foreign powers. Thus, the kingdom is ours!"

Gregory paused, then continued, "But is that plausible? My brothers' predictions strike me as overly optimistic." Once again, he turned his smile on me. "What would you do, Konoha?"

"If you have no particular need for me, then I'll be on my way," I replied. "Lord Gil might attempt to escape the mansion."

My master currently resided at the Algren mansion in the eastern capital, imprisoned in all but name—and at my hand. I needed to return, to see his face as soon as possible. Every loathsome smile from Gregory made my heart long for Lord Gil.

But just as I reached for the door, Gregory's voice called from behind me. "Gil won't flee—not while his father's life hangs in the balance. I called you here today because I don't understand your goal as well as I'd like to. If you care for Gil, wouldn't arranging a meeting between him and Mr. Allen be in your best interest?"

I turned and glared. The man with the hateful golden symbol of the Church of the Holy Spirit around his neck knew that I had lied to Lord Gil. I had fooled my lord into believing that his inaction would save Guido Algren when, in reality, the old duke was already beyond help.

Space warped as two gray-robed figures materialized behind Gregory, their faces obscured by deep cowls. One was obviously a man. The other was smaller, perhaps an aged woman. With them was a figure whom I would never forget, even in death—a knight of the Holy Spirit in a boxy helmet, just like those who had slain my mother and my elder sister. The method of their appearance eluded me, but it was probably some variation of dark magic or teleportation. All three clearly outclassed me.

Lord Gil is my top priority. I chanted this in my head over and over again, trying to mask my animosity toward the knight, and then levelly replied, "Lord Gil's safety is my only concern. And I expect stormy weather beyond the mansion's walls. If you doubt me, feel free to activate the mark of malediction on my heart."

"Oh, yes. I understand," Gregory said. "My brother is dear to me as well, and I would hate to drag him into our schemes. Thank you very much. You may go."

Does this man expect me to believe that he holds Lord Gil "dear"? What is he plotting? Without realizing it, I found myself uneasily squeezing the bracelet on my left wrist—a memento of my mother—through my shirt sleeve. *Whatever his plans, I will keep Lord Gil safe, even if doing so costs me my life. Even if I must fight a monster.*

I bowed and left the room. As I shut the door behind me, I saw Gregory grin ecstatically as he turned to the gray-robed figures and the knight. I could read his lips. He was saying, "All the pieces are on the board."

Chapter 1

“Really? That sounds like quite an ordeal. Now, allow me to refill your tea, Mr. Allen,” Anna said, smiling cheerfully. The slender, chestnut-haired woman was head maid to the Ducal House of Leinster, holders of one of our kingdom’s Four Great Dukedoms and rulers of the south.

Anna seemed to have sensed that I felt myself perfectly capable of pouring my own tea despite being propped up in bed. Once I gave in and placed my white porcelain cup in her outstretched hand, the head maid gracefully set about filling it.

We were in a special room of the eastern capital’s largest hospital. The spacious chamber contained a bed that was too grand for me, several chairs, and a small, round table. More magical barriers and anti-eavesdropping spells than I could count surrounded it.

This was already the fifth day since we had stopped our former second prince, Gerard Wainwright, from leveling the city using the great spell Blazing Qilin. Anna had apparently arrived from the southern capital three days previously.

“Here you are,” she announced, proffering me a cup and saucer.

“Thank you very much,” I replied as I accepted them and then took a sip. “Delicious!” The cry of praise came unbidden to my lips; I could never have brought out such flavor myself.

“Respectfully, sir, I *am* the head maid of the Ducal House of Leinster,” Anna proudly declared. “My skills are second to none—that is, none but the head maid of the Ducal House of Howard, Shelley ‘the Mastermind’ Walker!”

“Particularly when it comes to, say...cleaning?”

Anna gave a cry and reeled theatrically, a hand to her forehead; she must have taken Mrs. Walker’s criticism to heart. “Mr. Allen, only my ladies enjoy such mean-spirited remarks.” The head maid glared resentfully at me before hiding her mouth with her sleeve. “Boo hoo hoo.”

“Forgive me,” I said. “Now, shall we return to the matter at hand? I can't express how sorry I am to Their Highnesses, Duke Liam Leinster and Duchess Lisa Leinster. I didn't mean to get Lydia involved."

Her Highness, Lady Lydia Leinster had been the albatross around my neck since our days at the Royal Academy. And in our battle with Gerard, I had imprisoned the legendary great spell Blazing Qilin within her body.

The lineages of the Four Great Dukes who governed vast territories in the north, east, south, and west of the kingdom were accorded the honorific title "Highness" in recognition of their ancestors' role in founding the nation. Lydia had also inherited the nickname "the Lady of the Sword," making her a symbol of the ducal houses' next generation. And yet I had subjected her to—

Anna peered into my eyes, her face disconcertingly close to mine. "My master and mistress think nothing of the kind, and neither does Lady Lydia," she said. "They dispatched me to the eastern capital in order to check on your safety."

I lowered my gaze, still holding my teacup.

There was no other way, was there?

The head maid reached out and gently rubbed my head.

"A-Anna?"

"I promise to report to my master and mistress that you did your very best in this matter," she chirped. "Please leave everything to me."

"Th-Thank you very much," I replied. "But, er, your hand..."

Anna merely giggled and added, "I'm still investigating particulars concerning Duchess Rosa Howard."

Oh well. I suppose I'll go over my notes for Stella's assignments again and—

A chill came over me as the door slammed open to admit a beautiful young woman with gorgeous, long scarlet hair.

"Well then, Mr. Allen, I must be off to speak with Young Master Richard. Please lie back and relax!" The head maid instantly perceived the situation and beat a jaunty retreat.

How could she leave me like this?!

"She's always the first to run," Duke Leinster's eldest daughter, Lady Lydia Leinster, grumbled as she crossed the room and seated herself in a chair, which she slid closer to my bed. I noticed that she was wearing a white dress. She then snatched the cup and saucer from my hands and deposited them on the table—after drinking what remained of my tea.

"What were you and Anna talking about while you were having us pack for our trips home?" she demanded, fixing me with a reproachful stare. "How dare you be unfaithful!"

"What sense does that make?!" In a calmer tone, I added, "I didn't tell her anything that I haven't told you already."

"I want to know why you were talking to her without me at all."

In an effort to evade Lydia's question, I turned to stare out the window. It was another beautiful day, and the green of the Great Tree was dazzling. I had been swamped with visitors until the day before. Even the sea-green griffin mother and chick that I'd encountered the other day had dropped by in the night.

"No particular reason," I haltingly answered the scarlet-haired noblewoman.

"Liar!" she snapped. "Let me guess—you harped on about your 'responsibility,' didn't you?"

Her accusation hung in the air for an awkward moment. At last, I responded, "I claim my right to remain si—"

"Overruled!" Lydia leapt onto the bed with a shout and sat, nestling her shoulder against mine. "We wiped the floor with that royal buffoon and saved the city, and you left your mark on the unmarried daughter of a duke. That's all. I won't say anything—not one word—about who's to blame!" She made a show of pressing her lips to the back of my right hand.

"We didn't do it alone," I protested weakly. "Owain was there too, and Tina—"

"Don't mention Tiny," Lydia grumbled, and butted her head against mine.

"Do you feel any different?" I asked, touching her right hand.

"Not at all." The noblewoman rubbed her head and hand affectionately against mine and murmured, "I don't want to go home tomorrow, you know. I want to stay with you." Her usual self-assurance was nowhere to be seen.

I patted her head. "No. Her Royal Highness generously extended your leave, but you can't stay. Descendants of ducal houses in the royal capital have a duty to return to their duchies for a certain period every summer and winter, even if it's become little more than a formality."

Lydia pouted. "Does that mean you'll be fine without me?" she demanded reprovingly.

"Of course not." I returned her determined stare, privately thinking that she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

"That's just what I thought. You wouldn't even mind if— Wait, what? What?! *Whaaat*?!" Lydia's retort trailed off in a string of bizarre cries as she hugged herself. "Y-You were supposed to say yes! D-Don't surprise me like that!" The panicked noblewoman pummeled my shoulders.

"Ow! N-No hitting!" I exclaimed. "Oh, honestly."

I wrapped my arms around Lydia's shoulders. She stiffened in surprise for a moment, but quickly relaxed.

"I can't shake this feeling that something is wrong, but I don't know what," I grumbled. "Some of the details in Felicia's letter from the royal capital don't sit right with me—that green knight and his friends visiting merchant families throughout the city, and the growing trade in military supplies." After a pause, I added, "I can only discuss these things with you."

"Hm... Only me, huh?!" Lydia suddenly leaned forward, pushing me down onto the bed and placing her chest at an extremely risky angle. "Just admit it—you want me to stay. Together, we'll have nothing to worry about!"

"No, you need to leave."

Lydia looked confused for a second. Once she processed my response, she yelled, "Why?! Don't you remember your promise? Your exact words were 'I'll never leave your side as long as I live, Lady Lydia!'"

I suppose I did say something like that at the Leinster mansion in the royal capital, while she pressed against my back.

"People will talk if you stay," I argued, taking care not to look at her bosom. "You'd need a better reason than my vague apprehensions."

"I would not!" she insisted. "One word to that scheming princess and my mother is all it would take!"

"That would cause problems down the road. Both the Lady of the Sword and Cheryl have reputations worth preserving."

Lydia currently served as a bodyguard to our classmate from the Royal Academy, Princess Cheryl Wainwright—a position generally reserved for members of the long-lived races. Her mere appointment had raised eyebrows, and she couldn't afford to attract any more negative attention.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman fell silent. When she finally spoke, it was to say, “Hey, why haven’t you been looking me in the eye?”

“I have my reasons,” I trepidatiously replied. “I wish you would get off of me.”

“No.” She paused briefly, then her tone changed. “You know, we’re alone in this room right now.”

I don’t like where this is going.

I attempted to escape, but she had my shoulders pinned down. I wasn’t going anywhere.

“I’m in the mood for a kiss,” Lydia said. “And I take it that you *do* like scarlet.”

“Huh? But you’re wearing a white bra to— It’s not what you think.”

“What isn’t what I think? Now, be a man and give in!” Lydia ordered as she brought her blushing face closer to mine.

Just then, the door burst open and two girls rushed in, frantically shouting, “Sir! You’re not hurt, are you?!” and “Allen! Are you all right?!”

The first wore a short-sleeved white shirt, a matching skirt, and a snow-white ribbon in her platinum hair, which was faintly tinged with blue. This was one of my students, Lady Tina Howard, a budding genius who housed the legendary great spell Frigid Crane within her body.

The other was a wolf-clan girl with ears and a tail the same silver-gray as her hair. Her outfit consisted of a short-sleeved blue shirt and black shorts. My little sister, Caren, was the vice president of the student council at the renowned Royal Academy, and I couldn’t have been prouder of her.

The instant they realized what was going on, both girls fixed their gazes on Lydia and me.

“I... I don’t believe it!” Tina cried, trembling.

Caren appeared equally agitated as she yelled, “You never learn!”

Lydia clicked her tongue and reluctantly climbed off of me to face the pair. “You got here faster than I expected. And I was so close too,” she said and touched her lips ostentatiously, provoking furious glares from my sister and my student.

“How could you assault my brother while he’s hospitalized?” Caren demanded.

"Y-You've gone too far!" Tina echoed her sentiment. "Today, we settle this!"

The trio's growing mana was beginning to fill my sickroom when the door flew open for a third time. Three new visitors entered, calling, "A-Allen, sir!" "Dear brother!" and "Allen, dear, I've come to seeee youuu."

First came a blonde girl in a maid uniform—Ellie Walker. She was Tina's personal maid, the heir to a long line of Howard retainers, and my student. The red-haired girl beside her, wearing the same outfit as Tina but in pale red, was Lydia's younger sister—my third student, Lady Lynne Leinster. The petite wolf-clan woman dressed in a kimono who had escorted the girls here was my mother, Ellyn.

Lydia, Tina, and Caren silently exchanged looks, and then their mana began to subside. They must have decided that fighting in front of my mom was a bad idea.

Thank goodness.

"Lydia, have you written to your family?" my mom asked.

"Of course, mother," the noblewoman chirped, instantly the picture of grace. Words could not describe the looks with which Caren and Tina watched the Lady of the Sword's performance.

The storm seemed to have blown over for the present, so I turned my attention to the angelic maid. "Excuse me, Ellie," I said. "Would you hand me that envelope?"

"Y-Yessir!"

Ellie cheerfully trotted over, for all the world like a puppy. But just as she made to pass me the envelope that she had fetched from the side table, she squealed, tripped over nothing, and toppled toward my bed.

"Whoa there!" I said, catching her as usual. "Are you all right? You ought to be more careful."

"Y-Yessir!" Ellie giggled bashfully, eliciting suspicious looks from Tina and Lynne.

I gave the angelic maid a pat on the head. "Tina, Lynne, you mustn't glare at Ellie like that."

The two daughters of dukes kept their gazes locked on their classmate as they approached, muttering that they had "grave suspicions of Ellie."

"Tina, would you deliver this envelope to Stella when you get home?" I asked. "She tells me that she's already solved the first notebook full of assignments that I gave her, so I've included another with my letter."

All three girls froze in shock.

"Allen," an exasperated Caren said from my bedside, "would you mind telling me when you found time to fill that notebook?"

"Huh?" I responded. "Last night and this morning. Why?"

My sister narrowed her eyes. Then she turned to look behind her and said, "Mom, Lydia, did you hear that?"

Both women responded with icy smiles.

Oh dear. They're upset. Angry. Furious!

I then endured a long talking-to about secretly working during my hospital stay. My mom, in particular, refused to understand that I was already well again—a sign of just how deeply I had worried her. I repented and resolved to at least take the night off. My hospital stay would end the next day anyway.

*

"Well then, Tina, Ellie, Lynne, I look forward to seeing you all happy and healthy in the royal capital."

Downcast silence greeted my farewell.

It was Lightday afternoon, the same day that I had left the hospital with a clean bill of health. My young students stood facing me on the platform of Central Station in the eastern capital, where a line of railroad cars was preparing to take on passengers. All three girls had hats on their heads and suitcases at their feet. They would soon be boarding trains for their respective homes, but the prospect didn't seem to thrill them.

"Don't look so forlorn," I said. "I can book my own trip for the Earthday after next, so we'll be able to see each other again in no time. That was the soonest that I could get tickets for. Because next Lightday is the Spirit Sending, the trains are crowded with people returning to the royal capital from Darknessday on."

Our kingdom followed the Unified Continental Calendar in dividing a week into eight days named for the eight classical elements—fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, ice, light, and darkness. By convention, Lightday was a day of prayer and Darknessday of rest.

A tug on my left sleeve drew my attention to Ellie, who was dressed in pale green. "A-Allen, sir," she said. "M-May I, um...lite you a wretter? Oh.”

“Of course you may,” I replied. “I’d be delighted.”

“Th-Thank you! I’ll work hard on my s-summer homework too! So, uh, if I complete it all...”

The maid was even more reticent than usual. I was still waiting for her to finish speaking when two venerable personages approached me from behind.

“Sorry we kept you waiting, Allen,” said a human man carrying a suitcase.

“Why must I sit next to this greenhorn?!” griped his elven companion, likewise encumbered.

These were the professor, under whom I had studied at the university, and the Archmage, Lord Rodde, headmaster of the Royal Academy. Gerard’s plot had drawn both of them to the eastern capital.

“Professor, Lord Rodde, I’m surprised to see you so tardy. Do you understand your position?” I asked, smiling.

Both gentlemen bowed deeply.

Our kingdom boasted the world’s most advanced railroad infrastructure. Train tracks connected every major city in the land through a hub in the royal capital. But by the same token, one needed to travel via the royal capital to get anywhere, so the professor and headmaster would accompany the girls that far. Then the professor would embark for the northern capital with Tina and Ellie, since he spent most summers with the Ducal House of Howard to avoid the seasonal heat. Meanwhile, the headmaster would continue west to his homeland.

Anko, the professor’s black cat familiar, hopped down from its perch atop his suitcase and sprang at Ellie. The creature seemed to have developed a fondness for the young maid, who let out a startled squeak as it landed on her.

Hot on the heels of the two academics, the Leinsters’ head maid returned from her shopping trip. “Forgive me for keeping you waiting! Picking out souvenirs took up a little more time than I expected,” she said. “Mr. Allen, Anko and I will see to my ladies’ needs.”

“Thank you, Anna. You never miss a beat,” I replied. “Now, Professor, Headmaster, let’s be on our way. Tina, Ellie, Lynne, please be patient while I speak with these gentlemen.”

The two dispirited scholars muttered their assent, sounding for all the world like men bound for the executioner's scaffold. The girls, in stark contrast, responded with a cheerful chorus of "Yes, siiir!" while they gleefully eyed Anko and the treats that Anna had bought.

I set off, pushing my crestfallen former teachers ahead of me.

The enormous clock tower on one end of the station was the largest man-made structure in the city. Despite its entirely wooden construction, the tower stood at least as tall as the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in the royal capital. The structure could never have risen so quickly without beastfolk aid.

I sat the two defendants down on a bench that commanded a good view of the clock tower, then cast a sound-dampening spell before crossing my arms and beginning the interrogation.

"Professor, Headmaster, I understand why you got the girls mixed up in this business with Gerard, but I'm still not happy about it. You should have been able to nip this in the bud."

"A reasonable criticism," the professor sheepishly conceded.

"But how were we to anticipate a great spell like Blazing Qilin?" the headmaster added.

"That I'll grant you. It's water under the bridge in any case."

My words elicited relieved sighs from the pair, but I was far from finished.

"Yet the problem remains entirely unresolved. We've learned that the author of the diary I found in the Howard archive created Blazing Qilin. Nevertheless, Gerard had its spell formula, copied from the diary's final page, and he employed the great spells Radiant Shield and Resurrection at the same time—albeit shoddily. These facts prove that he had backing. And then—"

"There's the question of where *this* came from." The professor set his suitcase on his lap and slowly opened it. Inside was a crimson dagger bound in chains imbued with powerful magic.

The headmaster groaned. "Does it truly demand barriers of this caliber?"

"In the hands of a skilled wielder, this single dagger would be more than capable of reducing a smaller city to ashes," I replied. "By contemporary standards, I believe that the power it contains would qualify as a tactical spell, and a taboo at that."

My assessment stunned the old elf, who was our kingdom's foremost authority on all things magical.

Taboos were spells forbidden among not only all human races, but demonkind as well by reason of their power or cruelty. In this age of magical decline, I doubted whether even ten sorcerers on the continent were capable of casting one. And regrettably, that was not our only concern.

"We also need to discover a safe method of releasing Frigid Crane and Blazing Qilin," I continued. "Headmaster, please pay a visit to your family and request advice from the elven elders. Those of the other long-lived races as well."

"I-Impossible!" the headmaster protested. "My house has disowned me! B-Besides, I shouldn't need to tell you how difficult it is to reach an agreement among the elves, let alone all the long-lived races!"

"I don't know the details of whatever arrangement your peoples came to following the War of the Dark Lord, and I don't intend to pry. But I can't remain aloof anymore."

I personally lamented the decline of magic. Still, it was likely an inevitable result of a more peaceful world, even if the long-lived races had deliberately set the process in motion. But if supposedly dead and buried forces from the past endangered Lydia and Tina, then I wouldn't hesitate to turn back the clock.

"Their safety takes priority," I flatly informed the headmaster. "Or would you rather sacrifice two children again?"

The old elf gasped. Then, reluctantly, he replied, "Don't get your hopes up. Not even the elders know everything."

"I know. I'd also like you to research the surname 'Etherheart' and the word 'key.'"

Both scholars pensively repeated the terms.

"Gerard called Tina 'the Etherheart girl,'" I explained. "It may be Duchess Rosa Howard's former surname, although my knowledge of aristocratic lineages is too limited to make anything of that."

"This is the last place I would have expected her name to come up," the professor remarked. "Have you told Walter?"

"Not yet, although I have told Anna. I suspect he'll take it better coming from you."

"And what is this 'key'?" the old elf interjected.

"Me, apparently," I replied, pointing to myself. "They weren't as vague as they've been in the past."

Both gentlemen cradled their heads in their hands, then leaned back against the bench and sighed. Lord Rodde even began to gesticulate as though he were throwing something.

"It's too soon to throw in the towel," I said. "Professor, what have the Algrens been up to?"

"Nothing noteworthy," he replied. "We suspect them of ties to Gerard's rebellion, but we've yet to find any definite proof. Lord Grant agreed to present himself in the royal capital in early autumn."

"A large Algren army, including the Violet Order, is still near the royal capital, but that's customary. Still, I never managed to get an audience with old Duke Guido Algren," the headmaster added. "And the Black Knight's body was never found."

And Gil Algren, Duke Algren's fourth son and Lydia's and my friend from university, had never come to visit me in the hospital—a sobering indication of how ill the old duke must really be.

"You can't take Lord Grant at his word," I said, aware that my tone had turned icy. "What reason do you have to trust him?"

"I thought you'd say that," the professor responded, nodding.

"But we have good cause," the headmaster added as he produced a document from thin air. "Behold."

"C-Could it be...?" I stared at the paper in amazement.

The magically imbued contract bore the signatures of two grand knights—Earls Haag Harclay and Haig Hayden, the renowned Two Wings of the House of Algren. Old Duke Guido Algren's right-hand men were known to all throughout the west of the continent as knights among knights. These living legends, famed for always being true to their word, were certainly more trustworthy than Lord Grant.

"I must admit that it's hard to argue with these names when we have no definite evidence to go on," I said with a shrug and a strained grin. "May I take it that court politics will be the scene of action from this point on?"

"With their lordships' guarantees, you may," the professor replied coldly.

"It's time for the adults to take the stage," the headmaster added in the same tone. "There will be no more bloodshed."

That sounded all well and good, but I couldn't keep my thoughts from running in unpleasant directions. The idea was preposterous. And yet...

My silence elicited a concerned "Allen?" from my former teacher and an “Is something the matter?” from the old elf.

“No,” I replied. “If that contract were forged, it would afford the perfect opportunity to rebel, but that would require pulling the wool over both of your eyes with magic.”

“It would take better sorcerers than the Algrens can muster to fool us, Allen.”

“And remember: forging a contract carries the death penalty.”

Both gentlemen dismissed the idea with a wave of the hand.

The Four Great Dukes defended the Wainwright Kingdom. That was common knowledge not only within our borders, but throughout the west of the continent. A rebellion would throw the nation into disorder and invite an assault from the Dark Lord’s armies. The kingdom’s great nobles couldn’t be that foolish.

“Pardon me,” I said, bowing. “That was an impossibility. Forget I mentioned it.” But even as I spoke, I couldn’t be rid of a gnawing doubt.

I ought to share my fears with the Ducal Houses of Leinster and Howard, just to be safe.

*

By the time I rejoined the girls, Lydia, Caren, and my mom had arrived with homemade lunches for them to eat on the train. Lydia had helped cook, although it seemed to me that conversation had been her real motive. The girls looked adorable as they took turns hugging my mom and Caren.

My father, Nathan, was nowhere to be seen. He regretted not being able to see my students off, but with the Soul Sending coming up, he had last-minute orders to fill.

The professor and headmaster were seated on a nearby bench, still deep in a continuation of our earlier discussion.

“What did you tell my parents and Caren?” I asked as I approached the scarlet-haired noblewoman, who was doing her best to appear perfectly ladylike in her cloth hat.

“Nothing you need concern yourself with,” she responded.

“What transparent lies you tell.”

“A habit I picked up from a certain someone.”

I breathed an exaggerated sigh. “So, what are you carrying your staff for? You could have just mailed it by griffin.”

With a delayed “Mmm,” Lydia pressed her cloth-covered staff—

a gift from the royal family upon her appointment as a court sorceress—into my hands.

“Lydia, this staff was meant for you,” I said slowly.

“*Mmm*!”

“Oh, honestly.”

Once I gave in and accepted her generosity, the scarlet-haired noblewoman untied the cloth bag that shielded the staff and exposed its tip. The scarlet ribbon that Lydia had tied there on a previous occasion gleamed in the rays from the station’s skylights.

“Since a certain someone is a worrywart,” she said, running her delicate fingers along the ribbon’s length. Plumes of flame fluttered joyfully as she pressed her lips to it. “You should be able to relax with this for a good-luck charm.”

Without answering, I produced a small notebook and jotted something down in pen. Then I tore out the page and handed it to the triumphant, scarlet-tressed beauty. She took it, quickly scanned it, and then lowered the brim of her hat.

“W-Well now,” Lydia said, a note of delight in her voice. “A proposal for invoking the Scarlet Sword with two blades at once and an experiment in adapting teleportation magic for short-range movement?” She giggled. “I’ll beat that rotten Hero to a pulp next time I see her!”

“Try to get along with her. She’s not a bad sort,” I pleaded, recalling the incomparably kind girl with whom we had been both enemies and allies over the course of our battle against the black dragon.

“No! She may act nice when you’re around, but with me— Oh, is it time already?”

The screech of a steam whistle informed us that the waiting train was ready to depart. A station attendant opened the doors of the deluxe car, yet my mom and Anna chatted away regardless.

“I do hope that Lisa likes the kimono...”

“You’ve nothing to worry about! It should be arriving as we speak!”

My mom had apparently sent Lisa a kimono. I tried to picture the duchess wearing one and decided that it would probably become her.

The girls were running toward me. Caren, meanwhile, moved to Lydia’s side. She seemed to have noticed my note and gave me a look that said, “Did you forget to include something for your sister?”

You don’t need it. I’ll protect you from any trouble you get into. After all, I am *your big brother.*

“Sir!”

“A-Allen, sir!”

“Dear brother!”

“Tina, Ellie, Lynne,” I greeted my exuberant students. “It’s time. I know I’m repeating myself, but we’ll all meet up again safe and sound in the royal capital. Take your time working through your individual assignments, and don’t speed through them like Stella. Whatever shall we do with your student council president?”

Those locks of Tina’s and Lynne’s hair jerked with jealousy and displeasure. Ellie was equally sullen.

“Tina, Lynne, try not to be so competitive,” I added belatedly.

“W-We are not!” they both cried, those expressive locks swaying fiercely in agitation.

“You’ll keep your promise, won’t you, Ellie?” I asked, turning to the angelic maid.

“Y-Yessir!” she replied, then hesitantly added, “B-But, um, Allen, sir! Would you teach me a new spe—”

“My ladiiies! It’s time to board the train! Please get ready!” Anna’s singsong call cut Ellie’s request short. The head maid stood beside the open door of the deluxe car, tying the length of rope that she held into a loop.

Wait, a rope?

“Finish what you want to tell me in a private letter,” I whispered in the flustered young maid’s ear.

“Y-Yessir! Th-Thank you so much!” she excitedly whispered back.

I then gave each of the three young ladies a pat on the head. “Now, please get going. Write to me if anything comes up, and I’ll be certain to reply.”

After an energetic chorus of assent, the girls picked up their suitcases and started walking toward my mom and Anna. I turned to check in on Lydia and found her giving Caren a last-minute reminder.

“Is that clear? Do *not* let him overwork himself!”

“I know that,” my sister curtly replied. “Unlike someone else I could name.”

Lydia flashed a gorgeous—and terrifying—smile. “You wouldn’t be talking about me, by any chance, would you, Caren?"

"Who else would I mean? And what did my brother just give you? Let me see!" Caren's hand shot out with blinding speed toward the note in Lydia's grasp.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman let out a mocking laugh as she handily parried my sister's lunges. "What, this? It's for *my* eyes only."

"Nonsense!" Caren grunted in vexation as the high-speed duel continued.

This is starting to look like a dog and a cat playing together.

Then the student council vice president, frustrated by her inability to snatch the note, resorted to forbidden tactics.

"I'll... I'll send back the ribbon on your staff!"

"That's for Allen to decide," came Lydia's swift retort. "Is that any way to treat your sister-in-law?"

"I don't *have* a sister-in-law!"

"You won't be able to say that much longer," Lydia replied, laughing triumphantly.

"Lydia, Caren, that's enough," I called after a glance at my pocket watch.

My sister groaned, but soon rallied and said, "Well, take care."

"Sure. Thanks," Lydia responded as the two of them touched hands. They were much better friends than they let on.

The girls were busy giving my mom another round of hugs by the train car door. I was taking in the soothing tableau when Caren sidled up to them.

"Tina, Ellie, Lynne, have a safe trip," she said. "I'll see you again in the royal capital."

"We'll be careful!" they responded in unison.

"Well said." Caren's tail wagged, while our mom watched over the four of them.

At that point, the professor and the headmaster approached me, clutching their heads in their hands. "Allen, all of this research is threatening to consume my whole summer vacation," the former groused.

"Shoulder your share of the hardship, young one," the old elf grumbled. "I'll be visiting my family for the first time in a century."

"I'm counting on you," I told them. "Everyone's here now, Anna. Please get on board."

"No, we're still missing someone!" the head maid replied, shaking her head. “Don’t tell me they’ve eloped!”

“I value my life too highly to pull a stunt like that, Anna,” a carefree voice called from behind me. “Hi there, Allen.”

“Richard!” I cried, turning in surprise. “Are you already well enough to be up and about? And is that...?”

There stood a tall man with curly, red hair—Lord Richard Leinster, Lydia’s elder brother and the vice commander of the knights of the royal guard. Leaning on his left arm was a dainty young woman in a dress with a stunning head of pale-scarlet hair and a demure expression. This was Richard’s fiancée, Lady Sasha Sykes. I had heard that she was sixteen.

“I’m fine now,” Richard said. “I just had a bit of trouble catching this rather rascally young lady.”

Sasha allowed his words to hang in the air for a moment. “Richard, darling, do you not care for me anymore?” she queried.

“Perish the thought!” Richard cried. “I adore you! Parting from you is agony, like being torn apart! I would pledge my eternal love to you here and now if I could, my dear, dear Sasha. But go home for now; your parents are worried sick about you. We’ll meet again in the southern capital.”

“Oh, Richard!”

“Sasha!”

The couple embraced. It was a moving scene, but it stood out like a sore thumb in Central Station. Passersby were giving them curious stares.

The spectacle drew a reproving “Young Master Richard” from Anna, a scathing “You idiot. And you too, Sasha” from Lydia, and even a cold “At least try to act sensibly, you two” from Lynne.

“A-Anna.” Richard blanched.

“L-Lady Lydia! L-Lady Lynne!” Sasha cried. “You see—”

“No excuses!” three voices snapped in unison.

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” the lovebirds responded, snapping to attention.

Anna’s focus shifted to the young woman with pale-scarlet hair. “Now, come this way, Lady Sasha. Earl Sykes awaits you in the southern capital. He’s simply livid about you decrypting secret communications and then traveling east without permission.”

“M-Ms. Anna,” Sasha stammered, “I h-had no other choice! I d-did it for love!”

“Well spoken, my lady,” the head maid replied, smiling pleasantly. “But I have a job to do.”

"R-Richard, darling! F-Forgive me!"

Lady Sasha attempted to flee, but Anna swiftly lassoed the terrified noblewoman with the rope that she'd been carrying. The deft feat even drew applause from onlookers.

Richard shed crocodile tears as he shouted, "Sasha, there's...there's nothing I can do!"

His fiancée responded in equally dramatic fashion with a wail of "Richard! I'll never, ever forget you, my darling!" as she was dragged away. They were made for each other.

A second blast of the steam whistle warned passengers to board the train.

"All right, it's time!" I called, clapping my hands. "Anna, Professor, Headmaster, please look after the girls."

"I won't let you down," the head maid replied, pinching the edges of her skirt as she dipped into an elegant curtsy. I responded with a slight bow.

The professor and headmaster both nodded and then began boarding the deluxe car.

"Lydia, you'll come again, won't you, dear?" my mom asked. "Promise me you will."

"I promise I'll visit again," the noblewoman answered. "Take care, mother. Please give father my best."

While they said their final goodbyes, a black shape approached my feet. "Ellie, I'm depending on you to look after Anko and Tina," I told the maid as I deposited the familiar into her arms.

"Y-Yessir!"

"Lynne, look out for Tina and Ellie in the royal capital."

"Depend upon it, dear brother."

"Humph!" Tina interjected. "Why am I the only one with two people looking after— Sir, that staff." She pointed to the long object in my left hand.

"Lydia told me to hold on to it," I replied with a shrug.

"I see," she said slowly. "Yes, I see! I-In that case, I'll—"

"Do you have something to say about me, Tiny? Stop dawdling and get on board!" Lydia snapped. Her sudden appearance drew startled looks from the girls. She was keeping her animosity on a short leash—likely because my mom was standing beside her. Even so, the trio shuddered as they picked up their suitcases and began filing onto the train, bobbing their heads to us all the while.

The albatross and I silently pressed our foreheads together and closed our eyes. Then we slowly parted and nodded to each other.

“See you in the royal capital,” I said. “I promise I’ll do something for your birthday.”

“I won’t get my hopes up!” Lydia quickly stuck out her tongue at me, then took her own suitcase and vanished into the train car.

I noted that Richard and Sasha were staring at each other through a window as I stepped away from the train toward the center of the platform. Caren stood on my left side and our mom on my right.

“They were all such nice girls,” my mom remarked, affection in her eyes. “Allen, Lydia really is the kindest person. She actually apologized to us earlier. ‘I’m so sorry for putting Allen in danger; it was all my fault,’ she said. It actually made me cry.”

“Lydia said that?” I asked. “Well now.”

“B-Be that as it may,” Caren interjected, “I still refuse to accept her as my sister-in— Allen, look at Tina!” She uncrossed her arms and tugged on my left sleeve.

The platinum-haired noblewoman leapt out of the train, gasping for breath, and threw her arms around me.

“Tina?!” I exclaimed. “What’s the matter? Don’t you know the train is leaving?”

“Sir! Let me see your staff! Quickly!”

Despite my confusion, I did as Tina asked, and she tied a brand-new azure ribbon to the end of the weapon. “For good luck,” she explained. “I want you to have my ribbon. A-And...this!”

My eyes widened, Caren shouted, and our mom let out an “Oh my” as the young noblewoman kissed her azure ribbon. Flowers of ice scattered across the platform, provoking a stir from the people crowded around the train.

Once Tina’s lips left her ribbon, she pressed both hands to her cheeks and declared, “N-Now we’ll be together, even when we’re apart.”

A long moment later, I ventured, “Were you watching Lydia?”

“What do you— Oh!”

The steam whistle screeched one last time, cutting short the puzzled girl’s question as station attendants closed the car doors and the train lumbered into motion.

“L-Lady Tina!” Ellie cried out of a hastily opened window.

“H-Hurry up!” a flustered Lynne yelled beside her. “Y-You’re running out of time!”

“Caren, take Tina!” I shouted.

“She and Lydia keep exceeding their authority! You’ll be hearing about these acts of arrogation from me later, Allen!” my sister griped even as she activated Lightning Apotheosis.

“S-Sir! Wh-What did you mean?! I demand an explana—”

Tina’s words trailed off in a shriek when Caren scooped her up and vanished. The next instant, the young noblewoman had been flung somewhat roughly through the train-car window, where her classmates caught her with a flustered groan and a cry of “U-Use your brain for once, Miss First Place!”

“Look at Caren go,” my mom said, clutching my right sleeve. “I can’t believe she overtook a train.”

“She’s your and dad’s daughter and my little sister,” I replied. “She’s bound to be impressive.”

A magical little scarlet bird darted out of the train and flew toward me. After alighting on the top of my staff, it delivered its message: “Infidelity is a *serious* crime!”

As if she isn’t fond of Tina too.

“Allen, I’m going to add one of my ribbons to that staff once we get home. I still have some from when I was little,” Caren informed me. No sooner was she back from her successful mission than she started making demands.

“I would be heartbroken if you started taking after them too,” I responded.

“I’m nothing like them. Also, while we’re in the eastern capital, you’re one hundred percent mine! Don’t forget— Oh, look.”

“Huh? Oh.”

“My goodness,” my mom exclaimed as we turned to see my students running through the cars, waving energetically to us. We waved back until the train vanished from sight.

"Mom, Caren, let's go home," I said with a smile. "Shall we pick up something for dad on the way?"

*

It was Windday, the fifth day since the girls had gone home to their families, and a pleasant breeze was blowing. The royal capital was roughly a day's journey away, and it would be another day from there to the northern or southern capitals. If all had gone according to plan, the girls would have reached their destinations two days ago—to warm welcomes, I expected. I had yet to receive a letter from any of them, to my slight disappointment. Knowing my students, I had half expected them to employ the fastest of red griffins.

My mom and dad were out of the house. They had told me that they were going to fetch something from an old friend.

I sat back in my chair and returned my gaze to my desk. The new notebook resting on it contained formulae for eight advanced offensive spells, still in the experimental phase, and a variety of support magic. I deliberately ignored the intense stare that I could feel coming from behind my bed.

I was currently the private tutor to four students. With Tina and Lynne, I would be focusing on magical control for the foreseeable future; they simply had too much mana. Lynne was a half step ahead of her classmate, so it was possible that she might also work through the notebook of problems that I'd assigned her in less time. Ellie...presented a bit of a quandary. The maid currently had a command of six elements—fire, water, earth, wind, ice, and darkness. She could also conjure combat-ready magical creatures, and the silence of her spellcasting was overwhelming. On the other hand...

"Should I really teach her advanced offensive magic?" I wondered aloud. "She showed no mercy to Toneri and his friends at the Summer Festival."

"That ship has sailed. And Ellie has talent—albeit a different type from Tina's and Lynne's," the world's most adorable devil whispered. Sounds of movement accompanied her words, and she seemed closer than before. She must have climbed onto my bed.

I almost nodded in agreement, but then shook my head. *N-No! She's a little angel! I must protect her and the saint of the north at any* *cost! I must!*

I would stick to my original plan and have Ellie work toward mastering flight magic, although I would also prepare her for advanced spells, just in case. As for Tina's saintly elder sister... It was possible that she was my most troublesome student.

"I had no idea that Stella was such a hard worker," I grumbled. "How can she have finished all her summer assignments already?"

"Once she sets her sights on a goal, she charges straight ahead until she reaches it. And give me a new spell too. I'm your little sister; you're *obligated* to pamper me!"

At last, an emphatic demand came from my ceaseless watcher, the adorable devil—my sister Caren.

I closed my notebook, set down my pen, and turned my chair to face her. She was sitting on my bed, hugging a pillow. As usual, she wore a short-sleeved shirt and shorts. Her puffed-out cheeks and the way that her tail was thumping the bed spoke to displeasure.

"You already have two aces up your sleeve—Lightning Apotheosis and the three-element compound lightning spear," I reminded my devilishly adorable sister.

"I want a new one from you! Like everyone else!" she whined.

"Jealous of your younger schoolmates? You're in your third year at the Royal Academy, but I see you're still a child."

"Meanie! You give them to Lydia and Stella!" Caren hid her face behind her pillow, but soon poked it out again to glower at me.

"Instead of enhancing your magic, what would you say to a new dagger?" I offered. "I'm certain that yours would break if you imbued it with four elements or more. I've already put in a request with Felicia. Besides, you have your university entrance exams to think about."

"I don't *want* a new dagger. You looked all over the royal capital to find this one for me when I started at the academy. It's my treasure," Caren muttered, squeezing the pillow and giving me a decidedly sullen look. "And if you keep treating me like a child"—she paused for effect—"I'll never grow my hair out! No matter how much of a thing you have for women with beautiful long hair!"

"You look lovely with any hairstyle," I said, unable to hide my bewilderment at her remark. "I still think you're the cutest in the whole wide world."

"D-Do you really— No! That's not the point! As punishment—"

Before my sister could voice her demand, I quietly approached her and laid my hand on her head. “Will this do?” I asked as I commenced a gentle massage.

She gasped and then grumbled, “That’s cheating. I’m fifteen years old, soon to be sixteen. I demand that you treat me like an adult!” Meanwhile, her tail was wagging furiously.

“Do you, now? In that case...”

I picked up two soft cushions, stepped out of my room, and set them down on the veranda. I then lay down, tapped the open space beside me, and called, “Come on, Caren.”

“That’s playing dirty,” she responded after a stunned silence. Nevertheless, she approached me and lay down as well.

I reached out and began gently stroking her head. Despite her evident annoyance, she made no move to resist, and her tail beat happily against the veranda. She also buried her face in my chest—just like old times.

The fragrance of strong sunbeams, Caren’s warmth, and the pleasant breeze through the open window combined into a powerful soporific. A nap was starting to seem quite appealing.

“Allen? Are you sleepy?” my sister asked, shaking me awake.

“Yes. Caren, what would you say to joining me for a casual afternoon nap?” I said as I opened my eyes.

“I g-guess I’ll have to indulge you,” she hesitantly agreed. “B-But don’t expect this to be a regular thing.”

I smiled and quietly closed my eyes.

*

“Are you home, Caren?!”

“Careeen! Are you there?”

People were calling my name. I recognized their voices too—they belonged to girls from the squirrel and leopard clans. They were old friends of mine, but I didn’t want to move; why would I leave any place so warm and reassuring and that made my heart race?

“Come on, Koko, let’s go in.”

“K-Kaya, we can’t.”

“Follow me!”

“Whoa!”

Hang on. Did she just say that they’re coming in?

I snapped awake and opened my eyes—to the sight of Allen’s sleeping face.

Oh, how cute.

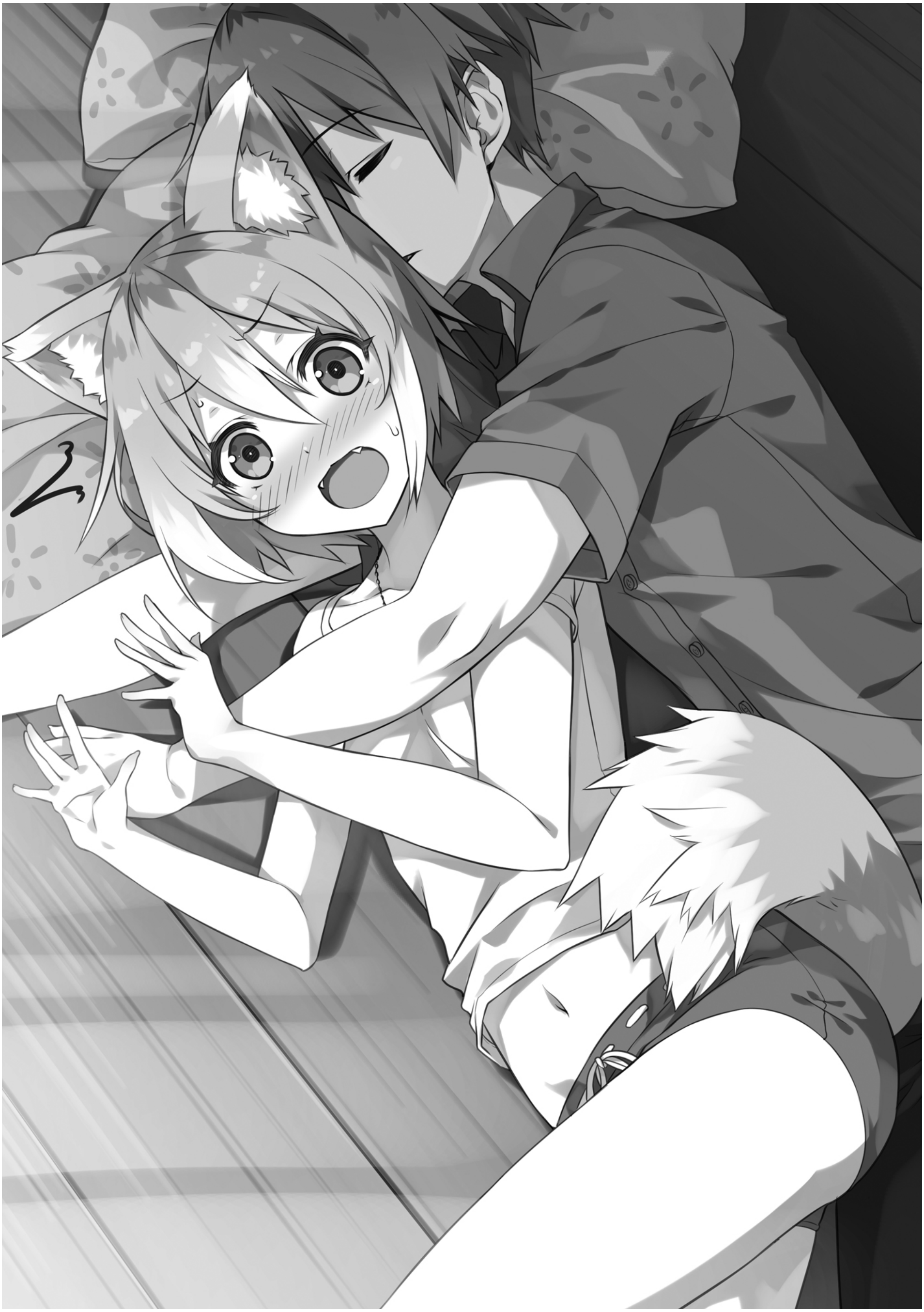
I dazedly reached out and touched his cheek. How many years had it been since I last saw him like this? He was normally an early riser and stayed up late into the night.

Suddenly, I sensed someone watching me.

“W-Wow. N-Nice going, Caren. I-In each other’s arms and everything.”

“I had n-no idea you were so daring!”

“H-Hang on! It’s not what it looks like!” I shouted at the two kimono-clad girls now standing in the hallway.



The short, confident one with her reddish-brown hair tied behind her head was Kaya of the squirrel clan. The tall, timid one with braided black-and-blonde hair was Koko of the leopard clan. They were both old friends of mine, and we always hung out when I was in the eastern capital.

I couldn't believe that Allen hadn't noticed their arrival. I renewed my determination to keep him from overworking during his stay here as I carefully withdrew my hand to avoid waking him. His arms hung limply, and I had already shifted their position, so I succeeded in extricating myself from them.

"Thanks for waiting," I said. "Now, let's move to my room; my brother is exhausted."

"You know, Caren, it's too late to fool us!" Kaya responded.

"I'd love to hear the whole story," Koko chimed in.

I crouched down and covered my face with my hands, overcome by shame.

"Let's go, Caren," Kaya said, seizing me by one shoulder.

"We can have a nice, looong talk," Koko added, placing her hand on my other.

We left Allen sleeping and moved to my room, after grabbing some snacks from the kitchen. My friends made themselves quite at home by setting out a folding table and cushions to sit on. I laid the snacks on the table before taking my own seat. Then, I poured glasses of iced tea for the pair.

"You showed up out of the blue," I said. "What were you planning to do if I wasn't here?"

"We knew you'd be around," Kaya answered. "I mean, we heard that Allen's still in the city."

"You almost never leave the house when he's visiting," Koko added.

I considered their words briefly. "That's not—"

"Don't deny it!" my friends interrupted in unison.

Although taken aback by their assertion, I raised my glass of tea, and they brought theirs to meet it with a satisfying *clink* and a joint "Welcome back, Caren."

"It's good to be back," I replied. "But didn't we do this just the other day?"

A few days ago, at the Summer Festival, the wolf-clan chieftain's son Toneri and his entourage had made a pass at me and gotten trounced by my brother for their trouble. After that, Lydia's revelations had turned the whole festival ground into one big party. I'd already gone through my reunion with Kaya and Koko there.

"Who says we can't do it again?" Kaya retorted. "Besides, you've been so busy with Allen and those cute noblewomen that you haven't had any time for us!"

"Tell us, Caren, is it true that *all* those girls are aristocrats?" Koko asked, bursting with curiosity.

"It's true," I answered as I sipped my tea. "Three daughters of dukes and one of their retainers."

Kaya and Koko let out suitably astonished exclamations as they flopped onto my bed. The looks they were giving me begged for more details, but I dismissed them with a wave of my hand. "I can't tell you any more unless Allen approves."

"Awww! Don't be stingy!" was their synchronized response.

Kaya's disappointment didn't last long, however. "So, is Allen an even bigger deal than we think?" she asked, raising her hand. "People are saying that he gave up a court sorcerer job to defend the honor of the beastfolk. And I hear that he helped to put down some trouble in New Town a few days ago too."

It sounded as though there was an effort to control information about Gerard's rebellion. The New Town beastfolk might not find it easy to admit that they'd been saved by humans before they even knew what was happening.

"He's incredible," I said. "He could teach at the Royal Academy or get his own department at the Royal University right now if he wanted to. That's about as hard as chieftains getting an instant promotion to marquesses."

"What?! There's no way they could pull that off!" Kaya exclaimed.

Koko echoed this surprise with a "T-Totally impossible!"

"That's my brother for you," I said, struggling to keep a level tone, although I was swelling with pride. "I don't think the chieftains really get it, though."

"Probably not," Kaya agreed. "None of the blockheads we're stuck with these days even bother to walk the streets."

"The militia and the people who visit the royal capital on the regular might actually have a better idea," Koko added.

“And the pip-squeaks love him. Don’t you think he’s always had a way with younger people? And old people too! They’re always talking about how he’ll make it big.”

“Huh? Are they really?” I kept my response casual, but I was elated. I loved it when people complimented Allen. But my expression must not have been as neutral as I tried to make it, because my friends started teasing me.

“Whoa,” Kaya said. “Koko, check out Caren! She seriously hasn’t changed.”

“She’s adorable!” Koko crowed.

“Wh-What are you talking about?” I responded. “Humph! I guess you don’t want any snacks.”

That got a laugh and a “Sorry! Sorry!” out of Kaya, while Koko commented that she “loved Ellyn’s cooking.”

“That’s better.”

A moment later, all three of us burst out laughing. We went to different schools, but whenever we met, it was like nothing had changed.

“Hey, this is kind of a serious question,” I said, “but how have Old Town and New Town been lately?”

New Town had once been the scene of a tragedy—a human noble had run over a little fox-clan girl named Atra with his carriage. Since her passing, the people of New Town had been even less friendly toward humans than Old Town’s residents. They had even given Allen a hard time.

I doubted that our parents knew, but my brother’s name was missing from the register of potential chieftains—a list that, as a matter of convenience, included every beastfolk except for criminals. In other words, the chieftains didn’t consider Allen one of us. When Lydia had told me that in the royal capital...I’d cried. It was too cruel. They had to know about all the amazing things that my brother had done.

“Hm...” Kaya considered my question. “I guess it depends on the person. There’s no extreme opposition from our generation.”

“And the little kids are probably even more open-minded,” Koko added. “I see them playing together in the plaza in front of the Great Tree.”

“I hope so,” I said slowly. If the antihuman sentiment kept subsiding, little by little, then someday...

“You know we can tell what you’re thinking, right, Caren?”

Kaya said, grinning again. “You asked that with Allen in mind.”

“You’re really crazy about him,” Koko happily chimed in.

“Of course I am,” I responded. “He’s my one and only brother in the whole wide world.”

I would take Allen’s side in any situation.

“Anyway”—Kaya rested her chin in her hands and gave me a look of pure curiosity—“did you always call Allen by name? I know you used to follow him around everywhere when you were little, but I’m pretty sure you called him something else back then.”

“That’s right.” Koko picked up the conversation. “You didn’t start going ‘Allen, I love you!’ until—”

“Y-You’re definitely remembering wrong!” I objected. But the curiosity didn’t leave my friends’ eyes. I knew how persistent they could be when they got like this, so I screwed up my resolve and planted my elbows on the table. “It’s not an interesting story,” I warned them.

“If you say so,” was Kaya’s response.

“I can’t wait to hear it,” Koko added.

I took a deep breath and began my reminiscence.

“I started calling Allen by his name because...”

*

“He’s late. *Way* too late.”

I was waiting by the front gate of the only beastfolk school in the eastern capital, and I was getting impatient. As usual, the fresh green of the Great Tree towered behind the three-story schoolhouse—tall for an Old Town building. Classes were over, and students were streaming out of the school on their way home. My friends called to me as they passed by.

“See you, Caren!”

“Let’s walk home together.”

“You won’t outrun me next time we play tag!”

“See you. Not today. In your dreams,” I replied to them all while darting glances at the school. But even after my classmates had all gone, the person I was waiting for still hadn’t shown up. I puffed up my cheeks and toyed with my braid.

“How dare he keep his sister waiting under the summer sun,” I grumbled. “Big br—*Allen* is absolutely hopeless.”

Oh no. I almost called him “big brother” again.

I had been trying to call my brother by name since I started school a year ago. I didn't want him treating me like a child—after all, I was a whole eight years old now!

I had been hoping to go home early that day and have plenty of time to play with Allen for once...but so much for that plan. I would just have to go to his classroom and call—

"Hey! Watch it, Allen!"

A yell came from the schoolhouse. I immediately picked up my bag and started running as more shouts followed.

"I know you bumped into me on purpose!"

"Totally deliberate!"

"Tell Toneri you're sorry!"

"This is what you get for always having your nose in some dusty old book!"

My bad feeling proved justified. I took a look around, then dove through an open window and took off down the hallway.

There they are!

Four boys from the wolf, goat, weasel, and rat clans, all wearing jinbei, were surrounding someone short. The beastfolk quartet had three new leaves on their sleeves, marking them as third-years—a year ahead of me.

"What are you doing to my big brother?!" I roared, quivering with anger as I charged into the group. Violet lightning crackled around me as I ignored the startled older boys and put myself between them and their target.

"I-It's not what it looks like, Caren," the wolf-clan boy said. "Um, er... I l-love what you've done with your hair today."

"Toneri," I replied, "I don't care about compliments from y—"

"Caren, indoor voice."

I turned to glare resentfully at the person who had just reached out from behind me and clamped a hand over my mouth. Standing there was a slim boy about my height. He had pale brown hair—and, most significantly, human ears and no tail. But his eyes looking back at me were the warmest and kindest that I'd ever seen. I couldn't stay mad at Allen, my one and only big—*elder* brother.

He was clutching a thick old book in his right hand and a bag just like mine in his left—our mom had made them herself. His sorcerer's outfit stood out like a sore thumb at school. The single green leaf on his sleeve meant that he was a fourth-year and ten years old.

“May I go now?” Allen asked Toneri. “I’d like to go home and read.”

“A-Are you makin’ fun of me?!” Toneri demanded.

“Of course not. You’re great at spellcasting—one of the best in all seven grades here on the last test. If you only practiced more, then—”

“Shut up! Who needs practice when you’re as cool as I am?!”

Toneri’s posse chimed in with a “Yeah!” and a “You’re the best, man!”

“Gimme that!” The rat-clan boy—Kume—tried to snatch the book out of Allen’s hand.

I quickly shook free of Allen’s grip, then immediately swept Kume’s legs out from under him. The rat-clan boy went down easily with a yelp of pain, giving me the opening I needed to grab Allen by the hand and drag him clear of the group.

“Have you had enough yet?” I asked, menacing the boys with a line of lightning spells. “If you keep pushing your luck, I won’t hold ba—”

Once again, Allen covered my mouth before I could finish.

“That’s quite enough of that,” he said. “You too, Toneri. Any objections?”

Toneri clicked his tongue. “Man, you’re pathetic, hiding behind your kid sister like that.”

“Yeah, totally pathetic!” his buddies chimed in. “And you ain’t even got real ears or a tail!”

I fumed and tried to pounce at them again, but Allen held me back. They were right about his lack of bestial features. His mana wasn’t that strong, and he wasn’t much good in a fight either. But still, he was working harder than anyone else in school!

“Work as hard as you want, Allen,” Toneri scoffed. “It won’t get you anywhere!”

Allen flashed a faint smile. Didn’t all these insults make him angry?

“You may be right,” he replied. “I don’t have anywhere near your mana. Still, I decided to walk on my own two feet, and I don’t intend to change that.” Under his breath, he muttered, “Mom and dad will worry otherwise.”

Toneri’s face was red with anger. He must have thought that Allen was poking fun at him.

Oh no. There’s no going back now; I’ll just have to bite Allen’s hand

and—

"Hey, what are you pip-squeaks up to?" a low voice asked.

The beastfolk boys froze. Allen removed his hand from my mouth and said, "Nothing, Sui."

"I'm not asking you, Allen. I'm asking those kids," said the tall, burly newcomer—a scary-looking fox-clan sixth-year with a piercing stare. Sui had been hanging out with Allen a lot lately, and I'd heard that his family ran a big shop in New Town.

The color drained from Toneri's face. He clicked his tongue again and yelled, "C-Coward! Humans don't belong here!" as he turned tail and ran. His posse shouted their agreement and followed his example. No kid wanted to pick a fight with Sui.

"You didn't have to scare them, Sui," Allen said. "You too, Caren. But thank you for coming to my rescue." He reached over and rubbed my head, which was all it took to put me in a good mood.

"Are you for real, Allen?" Sui asked, exasperated. "Didn't my uncle—I mean, our master—warn you not to let them take you too lightly?"

"Did he? I don't see what I can do about it, though. Toneri's magic is incredible."

"Are you kidding? I'm way more impressed with you for reading books like that one; it's tough as nails." Sui pointed to the hefty tome in Allen's hand. I was one of the better students in my class, but I couldn't even make out the title. Was it in ancient script?

"*A History of the War of the Dark Lord*?" Allen said. "I borrowed it from the library at the Great Tree the other day. Listen, Sui, it says that red signal flares mean—"

"Not interested," the fox-clan boy interrupted.

"Oh, that's too bad. But make sure to read it sometime, okay?"

"If I'm ever in the mood. Anyway, those pip-squeaks sure are reckless, always picking fights with you."

"Um... What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, puzzled by Sui's remark.

The sixth-year crouched down to match my height. Up close, I could see that his eyes were kind. "Listen, the most Allen ever does when people trash-talk him is frown, but when someone bad-mouths you or anyone else in your family, he lets loose with spells that you wouldn't—"

"Sui."

That one word from Allen made the older boy and me freeze.

"I d-didn't tell her anything!" the sixth-year said, waving his hands frantically while his tail curled up.

"I know, but please keep it that way," Allen replied. "Come on, Caren, let's go home."

"Oh, right." My heart swelled with gentle warmth as I instinctively grasped Allen's hand.

"Goodbye, Sui," Allen said. "Let's practice martial arts and spells together again sometime."

"S-Sure thing!"

Parts of their conversation left me with questions, but those could wait. I was holding Allen's hand, and for the moment, nothing else mattered!

*

"Well? Do you understand, big br—*Allen*?!"

Back in our room at home, I was giving my brother a long talking-to. I kicked my feet in my chair, looked over my shoulder, and asked, "Aren't you done yet?"

"I'm just finishing," Allen replied. "You're a second-year now, Caren, so you really ought to think about doing this yourself."

"No. Doing my hair is one of your brotherly duties!"

I had been having Allen take care of my hair for me since we were little, usually just in the mornings. But on days like this, when I'd had some unpleasant experience, I got him to redo it after school.

I inspected my hair in the full-length mirror. Allen had gathered it into two bunches, each tied with a violet ribbon. And if I did say so myself, it looked—

"I knew it. You look adorable with any hairstyle," Allen remarked.

"Thank you," I replied, giggling. Happily, I got down from the chair and sat on the bed. Allen and I shared one bedroom, and we always slept together in the same bed too. In my opinion, that was how siblings ought to be!

Once Allen was done styling my hair, he opened that difficult book and began to read.

This is no fun.

"Allen, at least *try* to fight back against Toneri and his goons!" I prodded him as I recommenced scolding. "Don't tell me your classmates treat you the same way."

"My classmates don't pick on me, and neither do any of the older students," he replied, closing his book and looking at me. "I'll be fine. And I can't think of a good reason to fight back."

"They're always insulting and being mean to you," I argued. "It would be legitimate self-defense!"

"You know some big words. Still, it's not like Toneri and his friends have hurt anything I care about. If I had the time to fight them, I'd rather spend it practicing spells or reading books."

He was still the same as ever, even though Toneri had been at his most unpleasant in ages. And how dare he leave playing with me off the list of things he'd rather do?!

"Humph." I turned my head away. "You talk about practicing spells, but I've never seen you do it. Not even after I tied my ribbon to your wand as a charm to help you get better."

The violet ribbon tied around his wand, which rested on a corner of the desk, was my very favorite.

"I do practice," Allen said, frowning. "Morning and evening. Although you might never have seen me, since you're usually asleep."

Most suspicious, not to mention alarming. Why, I had even witnessed Allen asking our parents to give us separate bedrooms just the other day. He was awful. Cruel. Inhumane! I shivered in the face of his schemes...and then began devising stratagems to thwart them.

"Allen, do you have any plans for Lightday tomorrow?" I asked.

"No," he replied, looking puzzled. "Unless you count finishing this book and going to the library to borrow another one, I suppose."

"Then we'll have a competition tomorrow! If you really have been practicing, you should be able to beat me."

"I'm not at all confident about that."

His unexpected response stunned me.

Wh-What's going on? All the boys in my class fall for that trick immediately. They get all fired up and say things like "Y-You don't stand a chance." U-Unless I think of something else, I won't get to play with Allen tomorrow. I... I couldn't stand that. Oooh...

"But I do want to play with you, so all right," Allen continued.

"Yesss! I'll take you to our battleground tomorrow!" I hummed to myself as I rolled over on the bed and hugged a pillow.

Please, I prayed to the Great Tree, *let tomorrow be sunny!*

*

Our home kingdom's eastern capital had two beastfolk districts divided by the Great Tree. We lived on its west side, in Old Town, but there was also New Town to the east. Why two separate districts? Because once, a long time ago, when there had always been a war going on, someone had burned down the city with a single spell. But the Great Tree had shielded Old Town from the blast. Then, after the war had ended, people had built New Town.

That was what I'd learned in school, anyway. I didn't know much about war, so I couldn't picture it. I mean, the eastern capital was such a big place. How could one spell make a whole city just—

A finger pressed to my forehead snapped me back to reality.

"Big br—*Allen*! What was that for?!" I demanded.

"You were just staring at the Great Tree and spacing out. Is this lovely weather getting to you?" my brother responded and chuckled. He was standing next to me, wearing a jinbei that was just like mine except for its color.

I puffed up my cheeks and reached for my hair, but then quickly pulled my hand back.

I almost forgot; I had him tie it up today because we'll be running around.

"So, where are we going?" Allen asked. "It can't be anywhere too dangerous, or mom will worry."

"You've been there before," I replied. "Follow me."

I took him by the hand and set off into the backstreets along the canal. The shortest route went by the Great Tree, but we would be taking the long way around—that way, I could maximize our hand-holding time. To my delight, we didn't run into many people this far from the main thoroughfares.

"Caren, we need to turn here to reach the Great Tree," Allen said, tugging on my hand.

"We're not going to the Great Tree. We're headed to"—I pointed to the forest visible behind the verdant giant—"the Great Tree Woods!"

The eastern capital was so full of greenery, I'd learned, that people in our kingdom also called it the "forest capital." But the immense forest that spread out to the north of the Great Tree wasn't actually that famous. To beastfolk kids, it was a playground that our families would take us to once we started school.

Allen and I moved quickly, following the canal to a connecting bridge and then passing under the far-sturdier-looking main plaza and Great Bridge. As we walked, we looked up at the plaza in front of the Great Tree. Everything was going according to plan. And then...

"Hey! Mind where you're walkin', tykes!" a voice boomed from the canal.

Startled, I ducked behind my big brother.

The voice belonged to an old otter man with salt-and-pepper hair and a white tail, who was glaring at us from his timeworn gondola. My hands tightened on my brother's jinbei.

E-Eek!

I started shivering until a warm hand came to rest on my head.

"Don't startle us like that, Dag," my big brother said. "You're scaring my sister."

The old otter roared with laughter. "'Course I am—I was *tryin'* to spook her. It's a rite of passage for you little ones. Still, it's not often I see you down here, Allen. Giving the library a pass today?"

He knows my big brother...?

I poked my head out from behind Allen's back and took another look at the old otter. Unlike before, he looked happy and kind. I kept a tight grip on my big brother's jinbei as I screwed up my courage to introduce myself.

"I'm C-Caren of the w-wolf clan, a s-second-year at the Great Tree Academy."

"Yeah, I know you," the old man responded. "Nathan and Ellyn's kid."

"H-How did you know?" I looked at my big brother in confusion.

"Dag can recognize everyone in Old Town on sight," Allen explained, smiling as usual. "Isn't that amazing? He used to be deputy chieftain of the otter clan, you know."

Dag guffawed again. "Come on, Allen, don't lay it on so thick. Want a ride? I'm guessin' you're headed for the Great Tree Woods."

"Thank you for the offer," Allen replied, "but I'm on a date with my sister today, so we'll take our time walking."

"Don't go too far in, you hear? Not that you could get past the barrier anyway. And drop by my place again sometime; I've dug up another old book."

"Thank you very much. I'll be certain to."

"Good lad!"

The old otter man seemed to be in a good mood as he rowed his gondola away from us.

Um, uh...

My mind was struggling to keep up with all this new information when I felt a pat on my head. "I met Dag in the library at the Great Tree," my big brother said. "I was scared of him at first—just like you are right now. Shivering and shaking like you wouldn't believe."

"I am neither sh-shivering nor sh-shaking!" I snapped. "C-Come on! Let's go!" I grabbed his hand and started walking again.

My courage soon returned. After all, being with my big brother made everything fun!

*

The canal petered out as we entered the Great Tree Woods. It was a forest, but undergrowth was kept trim, and none of the trees looked like they might fall on us.

The first thing I did was cast the intermediate lightning spell Divine Lightning Detection. A wave of electricity spread out from me and disappeared once it reached certain points. That was the barrier. The grown-ups had put it up to keep us safe, so we didn't have to worry about monsters or dangerous slopes as long as we stayed inside it. It didn't seem like anyone else was playing there that day.

I turned back to my big br—*Allen* and announced, "We're finally here. This will be the site of our—"

"Wow, Caren! Was that an intermediate spell?! That's amazing!" Allen rubbed my head, hugged me, and showered me with praise. The look on his face made me too happy to hold back a smile or stop my tail from wagging.

"A-Anyway," I said, "this is where we're going to duel—or rather, play tag. I'm going to run, and I want you to chase me! If you lose"—I took a deep breath and looked Allen in the eye—"play with me every Darknessday from now on! It's your duty as my elder brother!"

"Tag, huh?" he responded. "And what if you lose?"

"That won't happen!" I let out a confident chuckle. Then I activated strength-boosting magic, slipped out of Allen's arms, and dashed off as fast as my legs would carry me. "I mean, I'm sooo fast!"

"Hey!"

"The early bird gets the worm!"

I stuck out my tongue and sped off into the forest. I hadn't told Allen, but not even seventh-years had ever managed to catch me in these woods, since my lightning magic was good for both speed and detection. In fact, I could tell exactly where he was.

Huh? He isn't moving at all. Has he given up already?

"Honestly! What kind of big brother doesn't even *try* to catch up to his sister?!"

"You're just too fast, Caren. There, caught you," Allen said, circling his arms around me from behind without warning.

Where did he come from?! Still... I giggled. *No! Th-This isn't the time!*

I shook my head, glared, and demanded, "H-How did you get here?!"

"Huh? I followed you," he replied. "Does this count as your loss?"

"I...I haven't lost yet! Th-The real contest starts now!"

I dashed off into the forest again, then ducked behind a tree and cast a detection spell. Sure enough, Allen hadn't moved. Still, he had caught up to me a moment ago, so I couldn't let my guard down. I pricked up my ears, and then...I heard him! I took off like a shot.

"Oh, you figured it out," Allen said. I looked behind me and saw that he had almost reached my tree.

Hm... He must be using magic to sneak up on me. I don't know what kind, and I can't sense his mana, but...

"Not a problem!" I decided. "He can't catch me if I never stop running!"

I accelerated, darting between the trees at the top speed I reserved for special occasions. The breeze felt amazing! There was no way he could catch me like—

Suddenly, the ground gave way beneath me. I yelped as I flew forward and tumbled down a slope. My head was in a whirl, and time seemed to move at a snail's pace.

All the ground around here is supposed to be flat. Did I fall through a gap in the barrier?

At last, I caught on a tree and came to a stop. I was covered in mud from head to toe, and every bit of me ached.

"Ow," I moaned. "It hurts..."

I steadied myself on the tree and tried to stand up, but then squealed and sank back down when pain shot through my right leg. I remembered that I hadn't learned healing magic yet. Tears welled up in my eyes, and the world around me looked gloomy.

"Big brother," I sobbed. "It h-hurts... It hurts! Help, big brother... Big brotherrr!"

But cry as I might, there was no way that he would come to my rescue. I was outside the barrier, and the barrier was strong. I had never heard of a kid slipping through it like this. And then there was the slope. It was really steep, I saw as I looked up, still sobbing. I couldn't sense any mana from inside the barrier either—it was many layers thick to keep any monsters from coming close. Allen didn't have nearly enough mana to find me, let alone break through—

"Caren!"

My eyes widened. My big brother was standing at the top of the slope.

Even now, that moment is still...still...

*

"S-So, what happened then?" Kaya demanded, leaning forward over the table. "I mean, *c-can* you even touch the barrier out there?! It's crazy strong! I've never heard of anything like that!"

"Th-That must have really hurt, Caren," Koko added, looking equally anxious.

"That's the end of the story," I said. "Allen found me and took me home, and we lived happily ever after. It turned out that there *was* a tiny breach in the barrier, although I don't know what caused it."

"Whaaat?!" my friends responded in unison.

Allen had looked so cool back then. He'd been sweaty, and his hair had been full of leaves and twigs, but he had looked really, truly dashing. I still saw that moment in my dreams now and then, and it always made me hug my dorm-room pillow.

I couldn't tell Kaya and Koko that Allen and I had linked mana for the first time back then. And I didn't really need to mention that we had started practicing magic together every Darknessday after—

"I carried Caren home on my back," a cheerful voice from the hallway added as its owner poked his head through the door. "You should have seen her sulk when I explained that I'd been using magic to fool her tracking and then tracing it back to her."

"A-Allen?! Don't tell them that!" I yelled, breaking my personal speed record in my race to cover his mouth.

Those memories are supposed to stay between us!

Allen tapped my arms, so I reluctantly lowered them. "Hi there, Kaya, Koko," he said. "My, how you've grown."

"H-Hello, Allen," my friends responded as they sat up straight and started fidgeting.

"Don't suddenly start pretending you two are well-behaved!" I shouted. "And you too, Allen! Don't just—"

A soft pat on the head from my brother cut my words short. He tousled my hair a little roughly, and all my anger and annoyance ceased to matter as I twitched my ears and wagged my tail in spite of myself.

"Whoa!"

"Wow, Caren! You look so happy!"

Hearing these cries from Kaya and Koko made me quiver with shame. But just when I was about to lose my temper, I noticed a change come over my brother.

"Allen? What's wrong?" I asked.

"Wait a moment," he replied and stepped out into the inner courtyard, looking up. We hurried after him and stared at the sky. A wild griffin was flying overhead.

"Wow. It's really soaring," Kaya said, straining her eyes. "How did you pick up on it, Allen?"

Koko squinted too. "I can't make out any— H-Huh? Is it just me or is something f-falling?"

A small object left the griffin's back and plummeted toward us. When I looked closely, I could see that it was frantically flapping its wings to slow its descent.

"That hospital visit was quite a surprise too," Allen murmured. Then he clenched his right hand, simultaneously casting wind and levitation spells. At once, the object's fall began to stabilize.

I gradually got a clearer view of the thing. It was a ball of beautiful azure-and-emerald fur with tiny wings—the sea-green griffin chick that we'd met the other day! The baby creature fluttered gently down into Allen's arms, where it began happily cooing. My friends gave me stunned looks.

"You're kidding!" Kaya exclaimed. "I thought wild sea-green griffins didn't like people."

"Carennn," Koko chimed in, "we learned that they've got tons of mana, and people barely even register to them."

"There are friendly griffins too," I argued. "Like this little one."

The chick was purring away in Allen's arms while he stroked its head and smiled. My friends blushed, much to my annoyance.

"S-So, um, Allen, what are you going to do with it?" Kaya asked.

"I d-don't think a sea-green griffin would land in the middle of town," Koko added.

"I'll return it to its parent," Allen replied. "It looks worried up there, so we'd better hurry."

The adult griffin was circling overhead. Still, returning the chick would be easier said than done.

All of a sudden, a loud, singsong cry came from the entrance. "Allen, Caren, I'm hooome!"

Our mom was back from her errand.

"Welcome home, mom. We're in the courtyard," Allen called back. Then, he turned to us. "Oh, I know! Do you three have any plans after this?"

"Not really," I replied, confused. Kaya and Koko cheerfully echoed my response.

"I see. In that case— Hey!"

The chick clambered up Allen's shoulder and onto his head.

What should I do? This is so adorable that it makes me want a video orb right now, but our family can't afford fancy gadgets like—

An orb popped up beside me as my mom cried, "Oh, Allen, that's perfect! Kaya, Koko, it's so lovely to see you!" Her eyes were sparkling as she recorded.

Did Anna leave that orb with her?!

The griffin chick fluttered its wings in delight while Allen grumbled, "What a handful you are. Mom, this little one is lost. Caren, her friends, and I are going to help it home."

“Oh? My, how awful!” our mom exclaimed. “I think Nathan will be home by dinnertime, so try to make it back before then. He always takes his sweet time when he finds an old magic gizmo to tinker with.”

“U-Um, Allen...”

“H-How exactly are we going to return that chick?” my friends asked, making a point to raise their hands.

“If its mother won’t alight here, then we’ll just have to leave the city,” he answered, smiling as he returned the chick to his arms. “We can take Dag’s gondola.”

“When you say Dag...”

“D-Do you mean the former otter-clan deputy chieftain?” Kaya and Koko asked in surprise.

“That’s right. He’s the best gondolier in the city. I’ll go fetch my jacket.”

With that, Allen vanished into his room.

Kaya and Koko turned to face me and exclaimed, “Allen’s *incredible*!” Hearing them compliment my brother put me in a good mood. My mom smiled too, still holding her orb at the ready.

“Now, let’s get going,” Allen said once he returned wearing his jacket. “We’ll need to hurry a bit if we want to be home in time for dinner.”

We made straight for the docks, swiftly traversing the roofs of houses with the aid of botanical and perception-blocking magic. While we were up high, Allen carried Koko, and I held on to Kaya.

Koko, that’s kind of playing dirty.

Once we boarded the gondola, we got a taste of Dag’s best rowing. The griffin chick loved it, but this time Kaya clung to Allen, and Koko to me.

Kaya, that’s not exactly fair either.

Once we were outside the city limits, we were finally able to return the chick to its mother. Her beauty made a big impression on my friends, who had never seen a griffin land at such close quarters. Both mother and child shook themselves in a show of gratitude, then the mother sea-green griffin flew a few circles above our heads before soaring off with her child on her back.

In the gondola on our way home, my friends whispered to me, “Allen really is the coolest!”

Of course he is. After all, he’s my one and only brother in the whole wide world.

Chapter 2

"Tina and Ellie are running late," I remarked. "According to Mr. Allen's letter, they're traveling with the professor, so I'm sure they'll be fine. Still, do you think that they could have gotten mixed up in some kind of trouble?"

Afternoon summer sunshine streamed in through the glass windows, illuminating the interior of Central Station in the northern capital. The station was bustling with people coming and going, perhaps because it was Fireday, the start of a new week.

I was waiting for the train carrying both my younger sister, Tina Howard, and her personal maid and friend since childhood, Ellie Walker. But its scheduled arrival time had already come and gone.

"Lady Stella, may I suggest that the train is merely running late?" came a calm suggestion from behind me.

I turned to see a tall, blond, earnest-looking young man in a butler's livery, adjusting his monocle. "You're probably right," I said. "Thank you, Roland."

"Think nothing of it," he immediately and dispassionately replied.

This was Roland Walker. The Walkers had served the Ducal House of Howard for generations, and he was—supposedly—the most accomplished young scion of his family's cadet branches. If I remembered correctly, he was twenty-two.

My father and our head butler, Graham Walker, must have thought highly of Roland, since they had assigned him to be my personal butler during summer vacation. To be frank, however...I found him just a teensy bit awkward to deal with. I mean, he never said a word more than necessary. I remembered him being a little more talkative the last time we met, when he had still been in training.

Still, my own personal butler. If given my preference, I would choose someone like...like Mr. Allen, for example. In fact, wh-what if Mr. Allen *were* my butler? "Lady Stella," he would say, "would you care for a stroll around the station? Permit me to hold your hand in case you trip."

"O-Of course," I would reply, bashfully yet happily taking his warm, kind hand. I giggled as I pictured the scene.

At that point, I snapped back to reality. I shook my head to clear it, pressing my hands to my regrettably flushed cheeks.

Wh-What's come over me? I m-mustn't think such things. I mustn't. M-Making Mr. Allen a butler would be simply...simply... B-But didn't Tina and Ellie say that he dressed like one at the Leinster mansion once? M-Meaning that if I only found the right pretext, I might be able to convince him to dress up and let me see him in a h-handsome suit.

O-On the other hand, when I wrote to him about Roland—just to avoid any misunderstandings—he sent such a mean reply. I mean, really, "You must make a lovely couple"? Oh, if only he would act the least bit jealous.

In the midst of my anguish, I realized that Roland was giving me a puzzled look. "Lady Stella?" he said. "Is anything the matter?"

"Oh, er, well... N-Nothing at all. P-Pay me no mind," I replied, rushing to pull myself together and put on a smile.

The butler said not a word but stood up straighter.

O-Oh no! I completely forgot about Roland and got lost in my own little world! I didn't say any of my fantasies out loud, did I?

I placed my hands on my cheeks and closed my eyes. I needed to be careful.

Just then, the board overhead lit up to announce that a train had arrived. Passengers flooded out into the station. I saw many different races represented, but very few beastfolk—an indication of their disproportionately low social standing. My house ought to employ more of them to set an example.

We waited by the ticket gate for a little while, and then...

"Stella!"

"Lady Stella! Huh? R-Roland?"

Tina and Ellie approached us, shouting and waving their arms. They were wearing hats and dressed for summer. With them was the professor, whose ensemble consisting of a straw hat, short-sleeved shirt, and long pants announced his intention to relax. His black cat familiar, Anko, rode on his left shoulder.

I waved in response.

"We're back," my sister announced when she reached us, grinning from ear to ear.

"It's g-good to be home!" our childhood friend added with a matching look of delight.

"Welcome back," I replied. "I see you enjoyed the eastern capital."

"We loved it!"

The mere sound of their cheerful response was enough to warm my heart. I turned to the professor, bowed, and said, "Thank you so much for escorting them all the way here."

"No need. I merely boarded a train," he replied. "Is that little Roly I see behind you? My, how you've grown. Is your father still alive and kicking?"

"'Roly'?" Tina, Ellie, and I couldn't help repeating.

Roland Walker was known for being cool and composed, the foremost perfectionist in his family, a man with ice water in his veins, and so on and so forth. The professor was probably the only person in the kingdom who could get away with calling him "Roly."

The butler adjusted his monocle and glanced at me before replying, "My father is quite well." After a pause, he added, "Professor, forgive my saying so, but would you please refrain from calling me by that name?"

"But you've always been Roly. You've never taken issue with it before— Hm? Oh, I see how it is." The professor abruptly changed tack, flashing a malicious grin at Roland while winking at me for some reason. "In that case, I'd be happy to correct myself—at least in Stella's presence."

The young man assumed a sour expression, but he reluctantly muttered, "Th-Thank you very much." He then hung his head and grumbled something that sounded like "How could I have been so careless?" I couldn't make heads or tails of it.

Tina and Ellie looked as confused as I was at first, but then they suddenly exchanged looks and began to clap their hands together.

"Oh, Ellie!" my sister exclaimed.

"Y-Yes'm! That must be it!" our friend replied.

The pair hopped in place and then nodded to each other.

Am I the only one who doesn't get it?

While I was pondering the question, Roland bowed to the younger girls. "Lady Tina, Miss Walker, welcome home," he said. "His Highness, Duke Howard, has appointed me to be Lady Stella's butler during her stay in the northern capital. I hope for your understanding."

“You’re assigned to my sister?!” Tina exclaimed, clenching her fists. “I see. Good luck! I’m rooting for you!”

Roland looked shaken for just a moment, but he replied, “I am your humble servant.”

“I’m on y-your side too!” Ellie chimed in, smiling and clasping her hands together. “And, uh, um... You don’t need to call me ‘miss.’”

“I fail to see your meaning, Miss Walker. You are the heir to the main house.”

Ellie groaned. Roland was already back to his usual, coolheaded self. Had I only imagined his agitation a moment ago?

“Mr. Allen wrote to me about most of your time in the east, but do you have anything else to tell me?” I asked, shifting the conversation along to the subject of Tina and Ellie’s travels.

“Nothing,” my sister replied after a moment’s hesitation. “Nothing at all. Now, Stella, let’s go home. Come on.”

“U-Um... You see, Lady Stella, at the station in the eastern capital, Lady Tina—”

“Ellie,” Tina interjected. She still looked calm, but her interruption aroused my suspicions.

I stared hard at my sister’s face while a flustered Ellie whimpered. Tina suddenly avoided my gaze, and that lock of her bangs was swaying happily. She was hiding something—and it probably involved Mr. Allen!

“You’ll tell me what happened, won’t you, Ellie?”

“Y-Yes’m!” Ellie responded. “B-But I’m, um, L-Lady Tina’s personal maid, so...”

“Are you certain, Ellie?” I said quietly, meeting my childhood friend’s gaze. Her timid eyes grew firm, and she slightly puffed up her cheeks.

“Lady Tina tied her azure ribbon onto Mr. Allen’s staff at the station in the eastern capital!”

“Ellie?!” Tina cried.

“I d-don’t think you should have tried to g-get ahead of us like that! A-And it was dangerous!”

“I w-wasn’t trying to get ahead of anyone!” my sister protested. “A-And as for dangerous... Well, it *was*, but...”

While they argued, I pictured Tina tying her ribbon around Mr. Allen’s staff. It wasn’t fair. I wished that I could have done the same thing. But I was their big sister, and I thought I knew what Mr.

Allen would have done.

“No fighting, you two!” I said, lightly pressing an index finger to each girl’s forehead. “Tina, getting a head start on us like that wasn’t playing fair. Ellie, let’s demand extra attention to make up for it once we’re back in the royal capital. All right?”

“Y-Yes’m!” Ellie responded.

“B-But...” my sister groaned, looking dejected.

I stroked her soft hair. “Don’t look so down. What else happened?”

“Well— Oh, that’s right. I have something to give you.” Tina looked a little vexed as she proffered me an envelope. It was the same type used for ordinary griffin mail, except for the spell formula inscribed on its reverse side. I felt my heartbeat speed up as I took it.

“What’s this?” I asked, although I knew the answer.

“I know you don’t need me to tell you, Stella,” Tina said. “It’s from Mr. Allen.”

“I s-see. Th-Thank you.” I couldn’t keep my speech from faltering. My heart raced as I began to open the envelope...and then stopped. “T-Tina? E-Ellie? D-Do you need something?”

“Please don’t give us...”

“A s-second thought!” the pair replied in turn, peering from behind me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Lady Tina, Miss Walker,” my personal butler interjected, “please refrain from doing anything to inconvenience Lady Stella in —”

“Don’t worry, Roland. I’m fine,” I said, silencing the persnickety young man. Then, I addressed Tina and Ellie. “Very well, let’s read it together.”

“Stella, I love you!” my sister chirped.

“A-And I yove lou too! Oh...” Ellie chimed in.

Their enthusiasm put me in a good mood as I returned my attention to the envelope. I stood still and took several deep breaths.

Ready!

I tried to steady my heart, which was beating out a rapid tattoo, as I slowly broke the seal. The faint traces of Mr. Allen’s mana that lingered in it seemed precious to me.

The envelope contained a letter and a brand-new notebook. Elation welled up from deep within me. I could barely contain my delight as I hugged the notebook, taking care not to damage it. My heart had room for nothing else—I was in heaven. What a simple woman I was, I thought as I giggled in spite of myself.

I'd been ever so anxious when writing "I've already completed all the assignments in the notebook you gave me" in my last letter, fearing that begging for a second one might appear selfish, but it had paid off! Oh, b-but had it been a burden? If Mr. Allen took a dislike to me over this, I'd be simply—

A sudden weight on my right shoulder snapped me back to reality. "Yes, Anko?" I said. "Is something the matter?"

The professor's familiar let out a meow.

"What?"

To my amazement, the notebook floated up and flipped open before me.

Tina's and Ellie's eyes widened as they cried, "Stella?" and "Wh-What's going on?" respectively. Roland joined in with an alarmed "Lady Stella!"

"Don't worry," I told them as, from between the notebook's first pages, I plucked a gleaming little azure-and-emerald plume.

"That feather!" Tina exclaimed, clapping a hand to her mouth.

"Is it from the sea-green griffin?" Ellie asked, looking equally startled.

"Oho," the professor remarked appreciatively. "That's quite the rarity."

"It's beautiful," I murmured before I knew what I was saying. Then, holding the feather carefully so as not to crush it, I dropped my gaze to the notebook and saw the gentle handwriting of the man I adored. It read, "A good-luck charm for a sulky student council president. Let's visit a café again in the royal capital."

Oh, honestly, Mr. Allen. I used up all my good luck on meeting you, and no charm will change that.

My sparkling white-and-azure mana escaped me of its own accord and fluttered through the station building.

"Stella seems so happy," Tina mused. "I wish I were in her shoes."

After a series of flustered cries, Ellie managed a wistful "I'm so jealous."

Both girls had their fingers to their lips, while Roland said nothing but adjusted his monocle two or three times. But I was oblivious to all of them. After all, this charm showed just how much

I was in Mr. Allen's thoughts.

The professor roared with laughter. "You're a lucky girl, Stella," he said. "That feather is precious, so take good care of it. Roly, I think it's high time we got going. I hear that Walter and Graham are out of the house, but Shelley will have some choice words for us if we show up late. I came here to relieve stress, not make more of it." He paused. "I have more than enough headache-inducing problems waiting for me back in the royal capital."

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"Ellie. Ellie! Wake up!"

"Y-Yes'm!" I cried. "B-But Lady Tina, there's n-no such thing as a trick to make your chest grow— Huh?"

I opened my eyes, and there stood Lady Tina in her nightgown, casting a magical light with her left hand. Even in my dreams, she still looked charming.

"Lady Tinaaa," I called, giggling happily as I hugged her.

"H-Hey! Stop that!" she cried. "C-Come on, Ellie! Wake up! Jeez!"

I yelped as something cold fell on my forehead, startling my mind awake.

Ice?

Our eyes met.

"L-Lady Tina," I said. "G-Good morning."

"It's still nighttime. Now. Get. Up." She took my hand and tugged me out of bed.

Let me think... Roland drove us from the station back to the Howard house. Grandma Shelley hugged me the minute I got in the door, then all the other maids did too. After dinner—which was amazing—I took a bath. Then I'm pretty sure I chatted with Lady Tina in her bedroom, and we went to sleep together.

I conjured my own magical light so that I could check the clock.

"L-Lady Tina," I said, "it's the middle of the night. Wh-Where do you want to go at this hour?"

"Someone might have spied on us if we'd gone earlier," she replied. "Now, let's go to my room!"

"Your room?" I repeated, confused. Then I nodded vigorously as I realized what she meant. "Y-Yes'm!"

Lady Tina was right; we'd been so busy that we hadn't had a chance to visit her room in the greenhouse—the room where we'd had classes with Mr. Allen. Another look at the clock confirmed that the day wasn't over yet!

I clasped Lady Tina's hand, and she said, "All right, Ellie, let's march!"

"Y-Yes'm!"

We crept gingerly through the house, casting perception-blocking and sound-dampening spells as we went. Almost everyone would be in bed at this hour, but the maids patrolled in shifts, and my grandma would wake up at the first sign of trouble. My grandpa—Graham Walker, the Howards' head butler—was away on business, but the detection spells set up everywhere seemed designed to fill in for him. The old me would have gotten caught the moment she left the bedroom.

I couldn't have done any of this without Mr. Allen! I thought as I led Lady Tina quietly down the long corridors, avoiding each and every detection spell.

"You're amazing, Ellie!" she whispered. "That's my maid! I might have gotten caught right away without you." She looked adorable, especially with the way her forelock kept bobbing.

"Well, I *am* your big sister!" I whispered back, giggling.

"I'd like to argue, but I suppose I haven't much choice. I'll be your little sister for tonight!"

"Y-You're *always* my little sister. E-Even Mr. Allen says so!"

"He does?" Lady Tina paused. "I demand details!"

"D-Don't look at me like that!" I pleaded. "Y-You're scaring meee!"

At last, we reached the room in the greenhouse, opened the door, and slipped inside. A magical light floated beside us as we approached the table and chairs where we had practiced almost every day just a few short months ago. I didn't spot so much as a speck of dust; the room had been kept spotless.

Lady Tina sat down in her chair, and I did the same in mine. The familiar feeling made me smile in spite of myself.

"Can you believe it, Ellie?" Lady Tina murmured, running her fingers over the table. "Last summer, I still spent all my time cooped up in here, reading books or tending and studying the plants." The silent curtain of night swallowed her words. "All because I couldn't do magic."

"Yes," I responded after a long pause. Lady Tina had always seemed heartbroken back then. She had worked so hard, but she'd gotten nothing to show for it.

"And look at me now. I'm the head of our class at the Royal Academy, and I can cast all kinds of spells—even my house's supreme spell, Blizzard Wolf," she continued. "I even made f-friends with Lynne. What would my past self call that, do you think? A fairy tale? A dream? Or...magic?"

"Lady Tina."

"Sometimes, I still find myself wondering if this is all a dream. I think that maybe I'll wake up in the morning and realize that I've never even met Mr. Allen." Lady Tina looked at me nervously. Her gaze was wavering.

"It's all right," I said, standing up and gently taking her hands. I was certain that Mr. Allen would have done the same. "This isn't a dream or a fairy tale. Mr. Allen would tell you so too. But I know how you feel, because...I feel the same way."

"You too, Ellie?" Lady Tina asked slowly.

"Yes." I nodded. "Before I met Mr. Allen, I was anxious all the time. I knew that I was the heir to the Walker name, but it didn't feel real. I honestly worried whether a butterfingers like me had any business being your maid. But I think that I've managed to grow a lot—or at least a little—since back then."

"Don't be silly, Ellie!" Lady Tina exclaimed. "You're the only one for me! I'm proud to have you as my personal maid!"

"Thank you so much. But sometimes, when I wake up in the morning, I wonder too," I replied. "Maybe it was all a dream, and there's no Mr. Allen, and I'm still my old useless self."

At that, Lady Tina burst out laughing—and when she said, "I guess we think alike," I couldn't help but join her.

"You know, Ellie," Lady Tina murmured a while later, shaking as she took my hand, "remembering what happened to Mr. Allen in the eastern capital frightens me. He would never have gotten hurt like that if I'd been able to keep the girl inside me under control. Do you think he's secretly disappointed in me? If...If he held it against me, I d-don't know what I'd..."

As my lady gave voice to her sadness and worries, I squeezed her little hand and cried, "He would never! Mr. Allen could never hate you, Lady Tina!"

My lady's forelock drooped. "I wanted to stay behind in the eastern capital," she confessed. "It's my fault that Mr. Allen got hurt, so I wanted to help him any way I could."

"Lady Tina," I said, "I f-feel the same way. I want to help Mr. Allen too. So, we need to work much, much, *much* harder than we have been!"

My lady took a moment to respond. "Yes, you're right. You're right! We need to work hard! Thank you, Ellie. I almost lost heart. We've been with Mr. Allen all the time for months now, so maybe I'm feeling nervous because he's not here."

"M-Me too. We've only been apart for two days, but I'm already missing his voice and the way he hats my pead. Oh..."

We looked at each other and smiled.

"Tina, Ellie," a calm voice interjected. "I hope you realize that I haven't seen him in even longer."

Startled, we both turned to look at the door. There stood Lady Stella, dressed in her pajamas and a cape. Neither of us had noticed her arrival. She wore a gentle expression and held a notebook in her hands.

She entered the room, seated herself in the only available chair—Mr. Allen's—and clenched her right hand over her chest. Eight white-and-azure snowflakes whirled around her. Was she invoking some sort of barrier?

"I would have loved to take lessons from Mr. Allen here too," she said. "You two must know that Shelley will be furious if she catches you sneaking out of your rooms this late at night."

"Th-That goes for you too, Lady Stella," I protested, groaning.

"I was only testing out one of Mr. Allen's new spell formulae," she replied. "I even managed to slip past Roland, who insists on standing guard outside my room no matter how often I tell him to get some sleep."

"A n-new spell from Mr. Allen?" Lady Tina repeated, incredulous.

"A-And Roland didn't spot you?!" I added, equally shocked. My grandpa had personally overseen Roland's training.

Lady Stella placed her new notebook on the table and flipped it open. We craned our necks to look and saw an anti-detection spell that used light and ice for enhanced silence. The formula was cleanly and meticulously drawn, with a note in Mr. Allen's hand: "This is still in the experimental phase, so don't consider it an assignment."

Lady Tina marveled at it, while I managed an "I-Increbidle. Oh..."

"I'm certain I don't need to tell you this," Lady Stella said, "but Mr. Allen is much more demanding than he seems. He put several assignments in this book that he knew would seem impossible at first. What a disagreeable fellow." Despite her words, she was beaming, and her forelock was swaying just like Lady Tina's did when she was happy.

"Stella..." Lady Tina said.

"Lady Stella, you seem awfully excited," I added, finishing my lady’s thought.

“Do I really?” she asked.

“Absolutely!” Lady Tina exclaimed. “Listen, Stella, if you get any closer to Mr. Allen, he might be even meaner to you. Don’t you think you ought to get out while you still can?”

“Hm... You may be right,” Lady Stella mused. She seemed to be lost in thought.

Lady Tina shot me a look that said, “Ellie! Back me up!”

Ohhh... I held my head in my hands. *I’m L-Lady Tina’s personal maid, but...but I love Lady Stella too, so wh-whatever should I dooo?*

I heard a chuckle from beside me.

“Humph!” Lady Tina fumed. “Th-That was an act, wasn’t it, Stella?! You were only pretending to care!”

Lady Stella giggled, grinning like a mischievous little girl. “I just know that Mr. Allen would have made fun of you if he were here. Still, I’m certain that you’re dearer to him than he can say. Tina, he may be mean...but I want to keep following the magician who cast a spell on me.”

“Humph!” Lady Tina fidgeted in her seat, and her forelock was sticking straight up. “Stella, you’ve started taking after our tutor.”

“Really?” Lady Stella asked. “That would make me happy.” A beautiful look of heartfelt joy spread across her face.

Ohhh... I feel defeated.

Lady Tina looked shaken too, but she rallied and babbled, “B-But I’ve...I’ve gone further with Mr. Allen than either of you.” At that point, her cheeks flushed slightly, and her forelock began swaying from side to side.

This is grounds for grave suspicions.

I had heard about the battle with Prince Gerard in the eastern capital, but not the details of what had actually gone on inside the old mansion where it had taken place. All that Ms. Lydia and Lady Tina had told me afterward was:

The great spell Ms. Frigid Crane, which lived inside Lady Tina, had taken over my lady’s body in a rush to help her fellow great spell Ms. Blazing Qilin.

When Mr. Allen, Ms. Lydia, and Lady Tina had defeated Prince Gerard, they had sealed Ms. Blazing Qilin inside Ms. Lydia.

Nothing else. And the professor and headmaster had been opposed to telling us even that much. But Mr. Allen had shut them down with a “If you’re going to complain after the dust has settled, you should have sorted out the problem yourselves."

H-He was so cool! B-But that's not what I need to focus on now.

Lady Tina made a show of touching her lips. Then she giggled softly.

Wind began to whirl around the room.

"Ellie, I understand how you feel, but keep your mana in check," Lady Stella warned me. "I'm certain that it must have been an emergency."

"Y-Yes'm." I hurriedly reined in the little bit of my mana that I'd let slip out.

Th-That's right. Mr. Allen must have had no choice but to, um...kiss Lady Tina. He did it to link mana with her so that— He's still never linked mana with me, though. I blushed in spite of myself.

Lady Tina swelled with pride and let out a disdainful chuckle. "Mr. Allen and I share a firm bond! We've even cast spells together!"

"Yes, I'm certain that you do," Lady Stella said, "but you're not alone in that." White-and-azure mana danced and sparkled around her as she lovingly drew a little azure-and-emerald plume from her breast pocket.

A grunt of vexation escaped Lady Tina as she balled up her fists and rose to the challenge. "I...I'll admit that Mr. Allen gave you a new supreme spell and secret art, a second notebook, and even a sea-green griffin feather...b-but you haven't beaten me yet!"

He hasn't given me *any of those things!*

The only things in my assignment notebook were exercises for making my spells quieter and for using levitation to move people and animals, as well as Mr. Allen's revisions of existing offensive spells. My cheeks puffed up with annoyance.

"You're both p-playing dirty!" I complained. "I...I w-want to try linking mana with Mr. Allen too, a-and I want him to teach me a new spell of my own!"

At first, the two Howard daughters were taken aback, but then they started to laugh. They threw their arms around me, Lady Tina crying, "Ellie, you're adorable!" while Lady Stella said, "I'm sorry, Ellie. Will you forgive me?"

Th-This is cheating!

I really, really, *really* loved them both, so I hugged them back and said, "No forgiveness! As punishment, you'll both have to..."

"Yes?" both my ladies asked expectantly.

"S-Sleep over at Mr. Allen's house with me when we get back to the coyal rapital! Ohhh..."

I got tongue-tied. Wh-Why do I always trip over my own words at times like this?

"That goes without saying!" Lady Tina declared. "I suppose we'll have to bring L-Lynne along too."

"If we're going to invite ourselves, maybe we ought to all barge in together," Lady Stella added. "Caren tells me that he has more than one guest room."

We all laughed.

It was like a dream come true. Lady Tina had learned to cast amazing spells, and Lady Stella was smiling gently. And it was all entirely thanks to Mr. Allen! I was so happy. So very, very, *very* happy!

We all faced each other. Lady Tina was the first to speak.

"Stella, Ellie. I know I've said this before, but...I'm serious." The earnest look on her face told me how strongly she felt.

"I...I'm, well, um, Lady Tina's maid," I said, faltering as I tried to put my feelings into words. "B-But if I could be at Mr. Allen's side too, then... Ohhh..." I hid my face in my hands. That was my limit.

I'm s-so embarrassed! I c-could never say anything like this to Mr. Allen's face!

Lady Stella spoke last. "You've both grown strong," she mumbled. "I'm grateful to him."

"That's not a real answer, Stella," Lady Tina pressed. "Wh-What do you think of our tutor?"

"Me? W-Well..." Lady Stella stared at her feather as her words trailed off into a bashful murmur. "I think it's ultimately M-Mr. Allen's choice to make."

Her cheeks flushed, but there was determination in her eyes as she continued in her normal voice. "But I still intend to do everything I can. After all...I do want him to choose me, so I need to work harder! The way I am now, I'm far from worthy to stand at Mr. Allen's side. That's Lydia's spot."

"I know that," Lady Tina said slowly. "But still—"

"W-We won't give in!" I shouted in spite of myself.

My ladies stared at me and then burst out laughing again.

Ohhh...

"I won't let anyone get the better of me!" Lady Tina declared.

"But our enemy is just too strong. I mean, it's not fair! She's cheating!"

"M-Ms. Lydia is, well...I don't know if 'amazing' is even the right word," I added. "And I think that she and Mr. Allen can understand each other without even saying anything."

"Have you noticed that Mr. Allen sometimes brings up his history with Lydia without realizing it?" was Lady Stella's contribution.

All three of us sighed. I looked up and saw a field of stars through the glass ceiling of the greenhouse, but any shooting stars vanished before I had a chance to wish on them.

"But we have a bigger problem," Lady Tina continued, frowning.

"You mean Mr. Allen's social standing," Lady Stella replied, looking equally troubled. "Of course, we could always solve that issue by ignoring it and fleeing to the Lalannoy Republic."

"Stella!" Lady Tina cried. "You're thinking like Lydia!"

"Am I?" Lady Stella asked with a perplexed tilt of her head.

"Yes, you are! I'd cry if you ended up following in her footsteps!"

"But can't you understand why she would think that way? As things stand"—Lady Stella's voice sank back to a murmur—"Felicia is the only one of us who could d-date Mr. Allen, since she's a merchant's daughter."

"I w-wish you wouldn't get embarrassed out of the blue like that! You're making me uncomfortable too," Lady Tina complained. "Oh, I just realized. There's an easy way out of this."

My lady suddenly sprang out of her chair and started hopping cheerfully in place. She was adorable...but I didn't know what to make of her.

"Tina?" Lady Stella said.

"Uh, um... Wh-What do you mean?" I asked.

Lady Tina answered with a haughty laugh. "It's simple! All we need to do is raise Mr. Allen's social standing ourselves! The Royal House of Wainwright champions meritocracy, and I can't imagine anyone more deserving of recognition than our tutor!"

"B-But I doubt that Mr. Allen would accept," I said, groaning.

Lady Tina grunted as if she'd been struck. "Y-You might be right. Back to the drawing board, I guess..."

"No," Lady Stella muttered a few moments later, frowning. "It's not a bad idea. Except...”

“Stella?”

“Lady Stella?”

“We can’t accomplish it alone,” she concluded. “We’ll need Lydia’s help.”

“W-We can manage without—” Lady Tina began, then stopped herself. “No, you’re right, Stella. This calls for...”

“Yes,” Lady Stella agreed, “we have no other choice. We need to keep our priorities in order.”

“Lady Tinaaa, Lady Stellaaa,” I moaned, completely lost. My ladies’ quick wits left mine in the dust, and they had reached an understanding without me. I felt excluded.

Lady Tina burst into a fit of giggling. “E-Ellie,” she said, “th-the look on your face...”

“Oh, Lady Tinaaa!” I cried.

“Don’t sulk, Ellie,” Lady Stella interjected. “Mr. Allen is an incredible person, but we can’t pretend that he gets the recognition he deserves. I can’t stand that, and I’m certain that Lydia feels the same way.”

“B-But I wouldn’t want to offend Mr. Allen,” I argued.

“That’s why we need to get Lydia on our side. She’s a terrifying foe, but if we can convince her to join us, then I’m certain that she won’t stand in our way—at least when it comes to this goal.”

“The more the merrier!” Lady Tina chimed in. “We’ll get you, me, Caren, Felicia, Lynne, and Lydia. And we should try to get in touch with Mr. Allen’s classmates from the university too. Let’s ask the professor about them!”

“I know one of them,” Lady Stella replied, nodding. “Lord Gil Algren.”

“What?!” Lady Tina cried eagerly. “But...that means three of the Four Great Dukedoms are practically on our side already!”

Despite my lady’s high spirits, I could only babble.

Where was my name on that list?! You’re awful! I’ll tell on you to Mr. Allen!

My cheeks puffed up larger than they had all night. I wasn’t sulking—I was furious!

“Of course, you’ll join us too, won’t you, Ellie?” Lady Stella asked, placing her hand on my head.

“Y-Yes’m!” I replied, startled. “I’ll d-do my very best!”

“Thank you. That’s quite reassuring.”

I giggled. Big Sis Stella's head rubs were my favorite.

"We'll summon everyone to a council once we're back in the royal capital!" Lady Tina announced, throwing out her chest. "Let's meet at the café with the sky-blue roof!"

"Y-Yes'm!"

"I'll let Caren and Felicia know," Lady Stella said.

This was so exciting. Just thinking about a secret council in the royal capital with everyone made my heart race!

And then, to my dismay, my stomach grumbled.

"Are you hungry, Ellie?" Lady Tina asked. "After all you ate at dinner? You'll never become an adult lady if you carry on like—"

My lady's stomach growled. Instantly, she flushed bright red and pulled her legs up in front of her.

"What good friends you are." Lady Stella covered her mouth and laughed elegantly at us. "Now, I think it's high time we call it a night—but it appears we can't just yet."

My lady and I let out puzzled cries as the door swung open. There stood my grandma, the Ducal House of Howard's head maid, Shelley Walker. She held a tray covered with a white cloth in her left hand, and she must have been in the middle of making her rounds, because she was wearing her uniform. She was also most definitely enraged.

"L-Lady Tina! L-Lady Stella!" I cried, rising to stand between my ladies and my grandma. "P-Please, save yourselves! I...I'll bold her hack! Oh... I got t-tongue-tied again."

"E-Ellie," Lady Tina said. Lady Stella held her peace.

"My ladies, what brings you here at this hour?" grandma asked, coming toward us. "Ellie, you ought to have stopped them."

I...I'm frightened. S-Scared witless!

Lady Tina and I hugged each other and began babbling excuses.

"It's n-not what it looks like, Shelley. You see..."

"G-Grandma, um, uh... Oh..."

"No excuses!" she snapped.

My lady and I shrieked, but Lady Stella spoke to my grandma as though nothing were wrong.

"I invited them, Shelley," she said. "Save your temper for me."

"Stella?!" Lady Tina cried in shock. I followed almost immediately with a "B-Big Sis Stella?"

"As the heir to the Dukedom of Howard, your desire to shield your juniors is commendable. However!" Grandma set her tray down on the table.

Huh?

"I wish you would repose some trust in me and consult me in advance next time," she continued. "I suggest we women stay up late snacking tonight, and I hope that you'll tell me all about your experiences in the royal and eastern capitals. Ellie, help me to set the table."

"Y-Yes'm!" I jumped up before I knew what I was doing.

We all get to stay up late!

"Shelley!" Lady Tina cried. She was shocked, but her forelock was swaying back and forth.

Lady Stella smiled gently. "I'm sure we'll have a lovely time," she said, laughing as she removed the cloth from the tray. Grandma had brought us a porcelain pot of herbal tea, a set of cups, and a small plate of baked treats.

After that, the four of us had a midnight tea party. Grandma's story of how she and grandpa met and got married was thrilling. As she told it, he'd even picked out her dress. That turned the conversation to clothes, and we decided that we'd go shopping in the northern capital the next day!

The p-plan was for my ladies and I to show our new outfits to M-Mr. Allen in the royal capital. I felt embarrassed, b-but I also wanted to pick out something cute that would win me lots and lots of compliments.

Duke Walter and grandpa would apparently be coming home from Galois the next day. I hoped that we'd get a chance to see them before we left for the city.

*

The northern capital, the cornerstone of the region, was divided into four large districts—one in each of the four cardinal directions. As I watched the cityscape through the car window, I remembered something that my late grandfather, Travis Howard, had told me when I was very young—that the city had been laid out to the same basic plan as the royal capital. What set it apart was its predominance of stone buildings and sloping roofs.

"Oh, look, Ellie!" Tina cried excitedly from the back seat. "That store is simply packed with people! I wonder what it sells. And those trees along the roadside bear edible fruit. It's delicious when you bite into it plain and just as tasty when made into jam! Hm... I don't see many cars on the streets!"

"L-Lady Tina, I can't see where we're going!" Ellie protested. My sister was leaning over to peer out her window too.

They both wore dresses—Tina's pale azure and Ellie's pale green—and matching straw hats with ribbons. I had on a white cloth hat, and a sky-blue dress that the maids had chosen for me.

My little sisters' excitement warmed my heart, but I turned my thoughts back to the city. One obvious—and unsurprising—difference between the northern and royal capitals was the lack of a palace. My house's administrative center stood in its place, but the sturdy, utilitarian buildings didn't stand out from their surroundings—the fruit of generations of Howard dukes doing their utmost to eschew pomp.

Also notably absent was the Great Tree that towered over the Royal Academy. I was sure that Mr. Allen would know the reason for that, but I still had much to learn. My heart leapt for joy when I realized that I had found another subject he could teach me.

And after my time in the royal capital, one more feature of this city sprang to my notice.

"The buildings aren't very tall, are they?" I remarked. "I suppose you could say that makes for a neat and tidy skyline. And the colors of the roofs vary by district, so they might look nice from above. I wonder if the station building would offer a good view."

"Lady Stella, climbing the station building is against the law," Roland Walker commented from the driver's seat beside me. He must have overheard me talking to myself.

"Don't worry, Roland. I won't go through with it," I said. "Are you certain that you don't mind accompanying us today? I know it was awfully sudden, so I'd understand if you had work to do."

"I finished it all before we left," he replied in his usual tone, looking straight ahead. I appreciated his bringing out a car for us. Still...

"Stella, Roland has a vital mission today!" Tina chimed in, poking her head out from the rear seat. "Doesn't he, Ellie?"

"Y-Yes'm!" Ellie confirmed. "Best of luck, Roland!"

"I, Roland Walker, shall commit myself body and soul to my duty."

We were on our way to go clothes shopping, just as we had decided the night before. At first, we had planned to get someone to drop us off at Central Station and pick out our own outfits...but over breakfast that morning, Tina had suddenly exclaimed, “Stella, let’s invite Roland to join us! We could use a man’s opinion, and I’d like someone to carry our bags! Don’t you agree, Ellie?”

“Y-Yes’m!” the startled girl had replied. “I’d l-love to hear Roland’s valuable advice.”

I had hesitated. Roland was my personal butler, but he had other work as well. Wouldn’t this be too sudden? Yet despite my misgivings, the young man waiting on me had adjusted his monocle and responded with a simple “Certainly, my ladies” in his usual dispassionate tone.

My butler must have been extremely dedicated to his job. He seemed to have stayed up to stand guard late into the previous night, so I would need to make certain he got some rest before he collapsed from overwork.

“I felt a little sorry for my father and Graham this morning, didn’t you, Ellie?” Tina continued cheerfully. “They rode griffins back from Galois, and Shelley set them to work as soon as they got home.”

“Th-The, uh, um, professor too, I think,” Ellie added. “The m-master and grandpa pressed him into service.”

My father, Duke Walter Howard, and our head butler, Graham Walker, had spent the past few days in Galois, a territory that our house had won in a previous war, making preparations for the major military exercises that the Yustinian Empire was conducting near our borders. They had raced to finish their business and make it back home in time for Tina and Ellie’s return, but the empire’s southern army had delayed the pair by announcing an eleventh-hour extension of their maneuvers. Even my father and Graham’s arrival that morning had been a stretch—the result of bundling their unfinished paperwork onto griffins for a return flight. They had only managed to exchange a few happy words with the girls before Shelley and her second-in-command had accosted them. The professor had doubled over with laughter as he watched the maids march them into the study...until they had seized him by the arms without speaking a word.

“U-Unhand me, Walter! Graham!” the startled academic had cried. “I came here to relax, not to do your work for you! I’ll have you know that I have difficulties of my own to— I a-already apologized for that business in the eastern capital! N-No! I’m taking a few days' vacation! A-Anko, save me from—"

The magnificent black-cat familiar had mercilessly abandoned its master and gone to join the maids as the front door slammed shut on the professor's last, desperate cries. Mr. Allen had left it out of his letter, but I suspected that the professor and the headmaster had gotten up to something in the eastern capital while—

"Lady Stella," Roland announced, "our destination is in sight." His punctilious voice snapped me back to the present.

"Tina, Ellie," I said, turning to smile at the girls in the back seat. "Get ready. We're almost there."

*

Ethertraut was one of the largest clothing stores in the northern capital, occupying a massive stone edifice that boasted seven floors above ground and two below. In addition to garments, it was known for its selection of jewelry, footwear, cosmetics, and everything else needed to look one's best. The business had been operating for over two hundred years and easily predated the War of the Dark Lord. Its name supposedly derived in part from that of a sorceress who had once rescued its founder. And in the innermost chamber of that venerable establishment—a spacious room reserved for high nobility—I found myself utterly bewildered by the mounting pile of clothing and jewelry on the large marble table before me.

This really wasn't what I had in mind.

"Here, Stella! I just know you'll look great in this too!" Tina announced, adding a pale-yellow-and-orange dress and a hat with a floral ribbon to the heap.

"L-Listen, Tina, I don't—"

"This too please, Lady Stella," Ellie chirped before I could get a word in edgewise. She handed me a sheer, jade-green dress with a low-cut neckline.

"E-Ellie, this really isn't my—"

"Won't you try them on?" both girls pleaded in unison.

"All right," I conceded after an awkward pause and vanished into the changing room. I had already modeled at least a dozen assorted outfits, but there was no end in sight. And to make matters worse...

I shifted the changing-room curtain and peeked out. A small army of shop assistants—all women—were watching over Tina and Ellie as they picked out one garment after another. The only man in the room was Roland Walker, who stood at attention off to one side, still as a statue. I had hoped for a more relaxed shopping experience, but Shelley had apparently given the store advance notice of our visit. No sooner had we set foot in the door than we had been ushered into this exclusive chamber, where mischievous looks had immediately spread over Tina's and Ellie's faces.

"We ought to start with...you, Stella," my sister had crowed. "Have no fear; Ellie and I will find the perfect look for you! I don't believe you've ever picked out your own outfit, after all. We'll take our turn once you're done!"

"I'll d-do my very best, Big Sis Stella!" Ellie had chimed in.

Tina's astute observation had left no room for argument. I was indeed a novice when it came to clothes shopping. My meager wardrobe consisted of outfits that I had convinced Caren and Felicia to choose for me, or that I had bought to match theirs.

I looked at the clothes Tina and Ellie had handed me and sighed. If only Mr. Allen were here, he would say, "You're so pretty that you look lovely in any outfit, Stella. Why don't you try this on next?"

Ooh... I c-can only imagine him being mean to me.

Nevertheless, I thought that I would gladly wear anything that Mr. Allen chose for me. I was simply dying to know his taste in clothing, for one thing. I seemed to recall Caren once saying, "You won't believe my brother! He dressed Lydia and me up as maids when we visited the Leinsters. He even made Lydia wear beast ears! It's my sisterly duty to put my foot down before he turns into some kind of deviant!"

Perhaps Mr. Allen had a fondness for bestial ears? He had been raised among beastfolk, after all. Perhaps...I could find such a garment?

Tina and Ellie's calls of "Stella?" and "A-Are you ready yet?" interrupted my silent reflections.

"Wait a moment," I replied. "I'm just changing now."

Reality had caught up to me.

Don't worry, Stella, I encouraged the me in the full-length mirror. *You can do this.*

And with that thought, I started putting on the outfits that my sister and friend had chosen for me.

I surveyed myself in the large mirror, wondering if the dress suited me.

“Tina, Ellie, I’m dressed,” I called, stepping out of the changing room.

The pair paused in their search for more garments and rushed over to me, their eyes shining.

“Very good.” Tina nodded with satisfaction. “These colors look lovely on you, Stella!”

“Oh, wow. You look simply stunning, Lady Stella!” Ellie smiled and pressed her hands together.

“Y-You think so?” I asked. “D-Do you suppose that Mr. Allen would like it?”

“Of course!” they immediately chirped in unison.

My butler took a moment to adjust his monocle and then asked, “Mr. Allen?”

The female sales assistants were giving me positive looks as well.

Overcome with embarrassment, I lowered the brim of my cloth hat—I had chosen to try on Tina’s yellow-and-orange dress first.

"Look, Roland! What do you think?!" Tina demanded. Ellie followed up with a "P-Please give us your opinion, Roland!"

The young butler glanced at me from his post in the corner, then swiftly looked away and replied, "I believe that the outfit quite, um, becomes you."

Being told that everything I tried on "became" me was a little bewildering in its own right. I wouldn't want Roland to stare at me too intently, but I was hoping for more useful feedback.

"L-Lady Stella, p-please try on the one I picked next," Ellie begged adorably.

"I haven't forgotten," I reassured her. "But first, Roland."

"Yes, my lady?" the butler promptly replied.

"All you ever say about my clothes is that they 'become' me. You're the only man here, so I wish that you'd be more specific."

"Lady Stella, you look positively..." Just when Roland seemed about to give a longer response for once, his words faltered and trailed off. And was that discomfort I saw in his eyes?

I waited for the tall butler to continue, but his silence persisted. At last I said, "Roland, are you not feeling well by any— Oh, how silly of me! I'm so sorry. Feel free to sit down."

"No, my lady, I am in perfect health. But thank you for your concern," he replied, snapping back to attention. Was he really all right?

Tina and Ellie pressed their hands to their foreheads and gazed heavenward. I wasn't certain what to make of the situation. Still, knowing Roland, I had a feeling he would be sure to give more specific comments on my next outfit.

If I'm going clothes shopping, I might as well pick whatever will get me the most compliments from Mr. Allen!

*

Once we were out of Ethertraut and back in the car, Tina let out a contented sigh. "That hit the spot," she said brightly from the back seat. "Dressing you up is more fun than shopping for myself, Stella! You look gorgeous and adorable in anything! We should do this again sometime in the royal capital!"

"Th-Thank you so much, Lady Stella," Ellie chimed in. "I had a great time.”

“What am I to do with you both?” I responded. “You’d better go first next time.”

“We will!” the pair chirped.

After agonizing over all my options, I had finally bought a dress in the palest possible shade of vibrant yellow with a matching cloth hat and a white jacket. The whole ensemble was an updated version of what I had worn on my first d-date with Mr. Allen. Once I was back in the royal capital, we could go on another...

Just thinking about it overjoyed me. I hoped that I would get a chance to use the sleepwear I had asked one of the shop assistants to find for me while Tina and Ellie weren’t looking.

True to their word, both younger girls had made their selections in far less time than I had taken. Although she might not look it, my sister was a woman of action, and she regularly dragged Ellie along on her clothes shopping expeditions. Faced with the difference that experience could make, I realized that I would need to learn from their example.

“Thank you for waiting, my ladies,” Roland said as he climbed into the driver’s seat after stowing our purchases in the trunk.

“You’re welcome,” I replied. “I’m sorry for making you tag along with us, Roland.”

“Think nothing of it. I’ll be certain to study the proper ways to describe a lady before your next outing.” As the butler adjusted his monocle and started the engine, I noticed that he sounded glum and that his brow had become slightly furrowed. I couldn’t blame him for feeling tired after spending all that time as the odd man out in a room full of women.

He had probably taken my request for more specific comments quite seriously, although he had never managed more than a stiff “That outfit becomes you.” I was convinced that he needed time off.

“Tina, Ellie,” I said, turning around in my seat, “would you object to a little detour?”

*

The maids had recommended this new café to me with great enthusiasm, and the number of customers suggested that they were far from its only fans. Something about the place reminded me of the blue-roofed café that we frequented in the royal capital, but what set it apart was—

“Shtella?” Tina said, pausing to stare at me.

“It’sh sho cold,” Ellie added, following suit.

“Finish eating before you speak,” I chided them.

“Ohay,” they answered together and then resumed their battle against the frozen desserts before them—mountains of shaved ice resting in glass dishes and capped with a sweet syrup of sugar and fruit juice. These weren’t on the menu in the royal capital. I hadn’t ordered one myself—they looked like more than I could eat.

“Here you are, Lady Stella,” my butler announced, handing me a saucer bearing a cup of black tea, which he had poured with polished perfection.

“Thank you, Roland,” I replied. “Have some yourself.”

“Certainly, my lady.”

I took a sip and found both the fragrance and taste of the tea to my liking.

Looking around the inside of the café, I saw that its subdued decor was also reminiscent of its blue-roofed counterpart in the royal capital. As I watched Tina and Ellie contend with their frozen treats, I wondered whether I would have ordered one if Mr. Allen had been with us.

I could just imagine him saying, “Stella, we ought to try one while we’re here.”

“I’d b-better not,” I would reply. “I could never finish it alone.”

“In that case, let’s order one for the two of us.”

I took another sip of tea.

Yes, he might say just that. And then...

“Stella, would you open your mouth?” he would ask.

“M-Mr. Allen, um...wh-what is that spoon for?” I would stammer.

“Eat up before it melts. Otherwise...I might become a wicked butler and do something dreadful to you, my lady.”

“Oh, Mr. Allen, y-you’re so mean. Mmm...”

That’s exactly what would happen. I just know that he would—

Tina and Ellie stopped eating to stare at me, snapping me out of my daydream with calls of “Stella” and “L-Lady Stella.”

“Y-Yes?”

“Just now,” Tina began, “you were thinking about...”

“Mr. Allen, weren’t you?” Ellie concluded.

“I... I most certainly was not,” I replied, startled.

The younger girls' stares bored into me, while beside me, I heard the clink of a teacup being returned to its saucer.

I picked up my own cup and allowed my gaze to wander around the café. Shaved ice seemed to be a favorite among students, while most other customers ordered tea or coffee. My gaze met that of the young woman working behind the counter, and she stopped what she was doing to approach me.

Wh-What? D-Does she think that I want to order something?

Being unaccustomed to dining out, I began to panic and looked to my companions for help. "T-Tina, Ellie, w-would you—"

But before I could beg for aid, the cheerful waitress was looking me full in the face and announcing herself with a peppy "Thank you for waiting!"

"Oh, um, uh... T-Tina. E-Ellie. Please."

My sister received my plea with an affected sigh and a remark that I was "simply hopeless."

"Th-There's nothing to be afraid of," Ellie added.

Roland kept his peace.

"Miss?" the puzzled waitress asked.

"Oh, pardon us," Tina answered tactfully. "There seems to have been a misunderstanding. This shaved ice is delicious!"

"I-It reminds me of something I ate in the eastern capital," Ellie added.

"You're familiar with eastern desserts?" asked the startled waitress.

"We had one made for us just the other day," Tina confirmed.

"F-From frozen fruit of the Great Tree," Ellie elaborated.

Their answers really seemed to take the waitress by surprise. "Th-That's amazing, especially given how much those fruits cost," she said haltingly. Then, quietly, she continued, "Um... You young ladies wouldn't happen to be from the Ducal House of Howard, would you?"

The girls looked to me, and I gave a slight nod.

The waitress snapped to attention. "It's an h-h-honor to m-m-meet you!" she stammered, her cheeks flushed. "I'd h-heard that Your Highnesses were in the royal capital. M-My little sister works at a café there, you see, and she wrote to me to say, 'This city is amazing! Just the other day, a handsome young commoner dined here with a duke's daughter!'"

Three soft cries of recognition escaped Tina, Ellie, and me as we recalled the energetic waitress from the café with the sky-blue roof. Now that I came to think of it, there was a certain resemblance. And hadn't that waitress lent Mr. Allen and me her umbrella when —

"'One rainy day, I lent my umbrella to a young man and a duke's daughter with gorgeous, long platinum hair!' she wrote. 'It turns out that couples sharing umbrellas doesn't just happen in fiction! Oh, I love this job so much! Tell me how well I've done!'" The waitress paused and then repeated, "'A duke's daughter with gorgeous, long platinum hair'... Th-That wouldn't be you, by any chance, would it?"

I merely smiled and replied, "Such stories are best kept within your family."

"Y-Yes, of course." The young woman laughed nervously. "I'll b-be going now; lots to do!"

With that, she fled my gaze and retreated back behind the counter.

Oh, th-that day was supposed to stay between Mr. Allen and me. But that's the least of my worries now.

"It's not what you think," I said, planting my elbows on the table as I turned back to face my companions-turned-interrogators.

"Royal Academy Student Council President Stella Howard, you do *not* have permission to argue your case," Officer Tina Howard coldly informed me. "You may only answer 'yes' or 'no.' I d-did hear rumors at school for a little while, but I never dreamed they were true! Just look—you've reduced Roland to a soulless husk! No wound could be more fatal! I'm going to write to Mr. Allen about this as soon as we get home!"

My sister pointed to my butler, who sat silent in his seat beside me. Roland Walker was frozen in place with both eyes closed and one hand on his monocle. His face was deathly pale and his brow deeply furrowed as he murmured something about "unforeseen circumstances."

Is this somehow my *fault?*

"Y-You shared an umbrella. Sh-Shared an umbrella with Mr. Allen," Officer Ellie Walker intoned, her eyes devoid of light. "Lady Tina, let's begin. We'll avenge Roland!"

I had no allies here, it seemed. Nevertheless, I managed to glean a wealth of information from Tina and Ellie while they grilled me. I couldn't help feeling that Mr. Allen was softer on his younger students.

By the end of the ordeal, Roland still showed no sign of recovery. He must have thought my conduct most unbecoming of the Ducal House of Howard. I had originally planned this stop for his benefit, so I would need to apologize for spoiling his chance to relax.

*

Dear Stella (who's probably still studying, even at home),

I've finally found time to answer your letter. Why, oh why *does everyone—you, Caren, and even Allen—end their letters to me with "I'm certain you're busy, so don't force yourself to write a reply"?! You're all awful! I'll admit that I'm not the best correspondent, but still...*

The royal capital is mostly peaceful. And sweltering. The maids from work and I have been visiting the café with the sky-blue roof, and Emma made fast friends with the waitress. She goes there practically every day now.

My job is going well too. Almost scarily well. To be honest, it feels just a teensy bit weird.

I knew that I was no match for you and Caren, but I still enjoyed spellcasting and academics. So I always assumed that, after the Royal Academy, I'd go on to the university with you. And yet here I am at Allen & Co., where I spend day after hectic day handling unbelievable quantities of produce and alcohol while I strike deals for ludicrous sums of money. I can't help wondering if it's all real.

Listen, Stella—I know this is going to sound strange, but do you ever wonder if Allen is a magician? Like, a genuine wonder-worker? Since I met him, everything in my life has been changing for the better.

I can't write to Caren about this. She'd laugh and say something like "That's just how my brother is. Felicia, is all that overwork finally starting to get to you?" Which reminds me: don't you think that she speaks like Allen sometimes?

Sorry for writing something so weird, but I thought that you might understand where I'm coming from. Now, I'd better get back to work.

You'll be back in the royal capital next week, right? We're all waiting for you.

Yours truly,

Felicia (who has a hunch that she'll be trading goods from the east on top of the north and south soon.)

PS: Don't you think that Caren is acting too excited? As her friends, I'd say that it's our duty to take her to that café in the capital and make her tell us exactly what happened out east!

And Allen is too soft on her! Overprotective, even! He treats her like a little kid! Why, just the other day, he asked me to find her something that you wouldn't believe! They can't keep acting like sibling bonds explain away everything.

What does Royal Academy Student Council President Stella Howard have to say on this matter?

*

I chuckled in spite of myself as I finished reading the letter from my best friend, sitting in my chair under the light of my bedroom lamp.

"Yes, we will have to speak with her," I said. Caren did have a tendency to use being Mr. Allen's sister as an excuse, although given everything that she had written to me about how he babied her, I was certain that she had her own share of difficulties. Still, I was glad for Caren's assurance that she would be enrolling in the Royal University with me.

Six days had sped by since Tina and Ellie's return. It was the Lightday of the Spirit Sending, which Caren had written to me about while the pair were still with her in the eastern capital. My best friend had doubtless set out cheerfully to attend with Mr. Allen. That was hardly fair of her, especially considering that I'd yet to receive a letter from him—owing, apparently, to foul weather.

I set Felicia's letter down on the round table before me and flopped into bed. The view through my curtained window was pitch dark, so Tina and Ellie were probably already asleep.

"It's just...so...unfair," I muttered, kicking my legs and hugging my pillow.

I wanted to go out alone with Mr. Allen too! Caren had written, "The Spirit Sending is an important beastfolk ritual, so I have no ulterior motives for attending with Allen. We are siblings, after all." But it sounded an awful lot like a d-date to me.

I kicked my legs again, failing to suppress a groan. True, I had gone on a d-date with him too, but that had been so sudden that I didn't think it really counted.

Have I always been like this? I wondered as I buried my face in my pillow. I couldn't believe that I was jealous of my best friend over something other than magic. Especially since she had written to me about the Spirit Sending the year before as well.

"It's all entirely your fault, Mr. Allen," I grumbled at my absent magician. Then I looked up and added, "How I long to see you."

I reached out with my left arm, snatched my notebook from my bedside table, and opened it. I flipped through the pages until I spotted the feather I'd been using as a bookmark, then pressed my face into my pillow again.

A train would take me back to the royal capital next Windday, and I would actually arrive there on Lightningday evening—probably too late to see him immediately. Lydia and Lynne would return from their trip home on Lightningday as well, and Tina and Ellie would be sharing my train. Mr. Allen and Caren, meanwhile, would arrive on Windday night. Knowing Caren, she would say something like "It's my sisterly duty to spend the night in your lodgings," and then...

I let out another, louder groan as my feet beat out a tattoo on the bed.

I've never gotten to spend even one night at— Oh! Wh-What in the world am I thinking? I raised my head and shook it. *I m-mean, I* do *want to show him the clothes—and the sleepwear—that I bought here, but that would be simply i-indecent. Yes, indecent. As a daughter of the Ducal House of Howard, it is b-beneath my dignity to—*

A great clap of thunder startled me out of my reverie. I got out of bed and approached the window, where I drew back the curtains to peer outside. The weather had been fair that day, but dense, dark clouds now covered the sky. Again, lightning flashed, and for an instant, I could see the Azure Dragon Mountains in the distance. As usual, snow capped their peaks.

The sight of those snows had prompted Tina to say, "Thank goodness. It looks like we'll have a bumper harvest in the fall" with evident relief. She was so clever and so kind—as was Ellie, who had been happily watching her.

I finally felt calm. I would see Mr. Allen soon enough, so I had nothing to worry about. Nothing whatsoever. I would just get a little more work in before—

I heard a soft knock.

At this hour?

The knock was repeated.

"Who is it?" I asked, approaching the door.

The reply was a subdued "Stella" and a tremulous "Oh, B-Big Sis Stella." It was Tina and Ellie. No sooner had I opened the door than the girls threw themselves at me, repeating their cries at greater volume.

They clung to me. Tina's hair was drooping, while Ellie had tears in her eyes. Both were trembling.

"Wh-What brings you here at this hour?" I asked, wrapping my arms around the nightgown-clad girls.

A third peal of thunder caused them to tighten their grip on me.

"Are you still afraid of lightning?" I said, stroking their heads.

"E-Ellie is," Tina replied. "N-Not me though."

"It's so scary," Ellie confirmed with a flustered groan.

"Whatever am I going to do with you?" I said. "Very well. You can sleep in my room tonight."

"D-Do you mean it?" came two startled responses.

"I never lie."

"Yesss!"

"Hey! No running!" I cried as the pair leapt straight into my bed and burrowed under the covers. Thunderstorms had always sent them scurrying to my room when we were younger, I remembered fondly. The overprotective Graham had never been far behind them.

"Aren't you going to bed yet, Stella?" Tina asked, poking her face out of the blankets. Ellie was squirming under the covers.

"I was just about to read a little more of Mr. Allen's assignments before turning in," I replied.

"What? Come on! We should go to bed together! Don't you agree, Ellie?"

"Y-Yes'm!" Ellie sputtered, coming up for air. "W-Won't you join us, Big Sis Stella?"

"Honestly, you two." I picked up the notebook from my desk and walked over to the bed.

"Y-You sleep in the middle," Tina demanded, backed up by a "P-Please?" from Ellie.

"All right." I squeezed in between them.

Just then, the brightest flash of lightning yet lit the room, followed by a rumble of thunder. Tina clung to my right arm and Ellie to my left.

"Don't worry," I reassured them. "You're safe with me. And

Tina, aren't thunderstorms important for the crops?"

"Th-That's beside the p-point," my sister whimpered.

"Oh, very well. You can stay like that until the thunder stops," I said. "Ellie, would you turn down the light?"

"Y-Yes'm." Ellie reached out and reduced the mana in my bedside lamp.

The shadows in the room deepened, stirring up a hint of baseless unease. I was too old to cower from thunderstorms—so what caused this feeling?

Tina, oblivious to my thoughts, finally seemed to have settled down. "Stella," she said, "everyone offered to send some of their crops to the royal capital after the autumn harvest. Once they arrive, let's all— Huh?"

"Tina?"

"Lady Tina?"

But my sister ignored Ellie and me as she sat up, her head tilted in puzzlement. Then she withdrew her right arm from the blankets and displayed the back of her hand—on which the image of an azure bird with outspread wings was dimly visible.

This is the mark of Frigid Crane, the sentient great spell that the professor mentioned! But why? There's supposed to be no danger of it rampaging out of control.

My stirrings of unease grew stronger as my sister touched the mark with her left hand.

"Tina?" I repeated and sat up in bed as well.

"A-Are you all right?" Ellie added, following suit.

The glow radiating from Tina's hand slowly faded until, at last, it vanished completely. Calmly, she murmured, "I'm fine. I think that she was trying to tell me something, although I'm not sure what exactly." She paused. "Stella, I'd like to write another letter to Mr. Allen in the morning."

"No, wait until we're back in the royal capital," I responded slowly. "It's too risky to write about Frigid Crane using our encryption. At times like this, I wish we had a telephone line to the eastern capital."

"That's true. And you're right. Oh, if only I could really talk with Frigid Crane!" Tina lay down again, flailing in frustration. Ellie and I lay back as well.

"Let's ask the professor about the mark tomorrow," I suggested. "Assuming he can spare the time."

“Small chance of that!” Tina declared.

“I, um, saw him crying in the hallway,” Ellie added.

Graham and the professor had been holed up with my father in his office since Tina and Ellie’s return, doubtless struggling to address the Yustinian Empire’s ongoing military exercises. The empire had never provoked us like this before, or at least not in my lifetime. And yet—

Another flash of lightning interrupted my thoughts, eliciting a cry of “S-Stella, the storm is back!” from Tina and a timid “B-Big sis...” from Ellie as the girls renewed their grip on my arms. A deafening crash of thunder followed. We were in for a proper tempest, it seemed.

Chapter 3

"Lady Lydia, Lady Lynne, welcome home!"

When my dear sister, Anna, and I arrived at the Leinster residence in the southern capital, we found every maid and manservant in the house waiting at the door to greet us. They had formed precise rows on either side of the scarlet carpet that ran up to the main stairway, and they bowed as we entered. I took the girls in the rearmost row for maids in training, based on their flushed cheeks and nervous demeanors.

This celebration—if one could call it that—always marked my dear sister's return from the royal capital, and now it did the same for mine. Being on the receiving end proved to be rather embarrassing.

"Romy, I know I always tell you that you don't need to make such a fuss," my dear sister remarked to the first maid in line, who was leading her colleagues. The tall, brown-skinned woman had been promoted to second-in-command of the Leinster Maid Corps approximately one year ago, and her close-cropped black hair and glasses suited her to a T.

"My lady, it is our pleasure to welcome you home!" Romy replied.

"Oh. Suit yourselves, then. Thank you all. I'll be in your care during my time off."

"O-Of course, my lady!" the servants replied in unison. My dear sister's expression of gratitude left none unmoved. Some of the longest-serving maids even had tears in their eyes.

In the old days, my dear sister would have marched straight to her room without so much as a word—or any other sign of recognition. My dear brother's influence was a force to be reckoned with!

While I was busy nodding to myself with my arms crossed, Anna and Romy led out a petite, young-looking woman whose chestnut-brown hair just covered her ears. She was dressed informally in a long brown skirt and a milk-white long-sleeved shirt, and she cradled a baby in her arms.

"Maya!" I exclaimed in spite of myself.

"Lady Lynne! How you've grown. And Lady Lydia; it's an honor to see you again. Oh, I...I..." The woman pressed a hand to her mouth and burst into tears.

This was Maya Mato, the Leinster Maid Corps's former number three and personal maid to my dear sister and me for years before that. Following her promotion, she had served under my grandparents, the former Duke and Duchess Leinster, and alongside Romy to maintain order in the former principalities of Etna and Zana. Our duchy had annexed both territories over the course of the three Southern Wars. While there, Maya had met and married her husband, and I'd heard that she had resigned her post. I had certainly never expected an opportunity to see her here!

"I see you're still a crybaby," my dear sister said kindly. "I'm glad that you're well."

"I am; thank you," Maya sobbed, her tears flowing even more freely. Her tendency to cry at the least provocation was nothing new, and it brought back fond memories.

"Maya," I said, "what is your baby's name?"

The new mother choked back another sob. "She's a girl, and her name is Lynia."

"Lynia," my dear sister repeated. "What a lovely name!"

"Thank you very much. Lady Lydia, if you don't mind...would you please hold her?"

Maya's request inspired a look of uncharacteristic trepidation in my dear sister. "Me?" she asked, her gaze fixed on the soundly sleeping Lynia. "But what if I drop her?"

"Have no fear, my lady!" Anna chimed in. "You have me at your side!"

"And me as well," added Romy.

"All right, then. I'll do it." My dear sister hesitantly took Lynia in her arms and prodded the uncomplaining infant's cheek with a slender finger. With a happy, gentle smile, she said, "So, you're Lynia? My name's Lydia. I'm a friend of Maya's."

The assembled maids trembled as though they'd received an electric shock, then they clasped their hands and knelt as if in prayer. I overheard cries of "Lady Lydia with a baby... Wh-What a heavenly sight," "B-Beautiful," and "I'm certain Lady Lydia will have one of her own in a few years' time!"

In short, chaos ensued.

The maids in training were no better. One strange girl with brown pigtails and stars in her eyes even reverently exclaimed, “O Great Moon, thank you for allowing me to witness such a wonderful moment!”

“Great Moon”?

Maya herself succumbed to emotion and wailed, “Oh, Lady Lydia, you’ve grown into such a beautiful young woman. I’ve never been so happy.”

“Come on; don’t cry,” my dear sister said, carefully returning Lynia. “You’re a mother now, remember? Do you want your little girl to laugh at you?”

“No. I’m so”—Maya let out a sob—“sorry.”

“Oh, you’re hopeless.” My dear sister took out a pristine white handkerchief and wiped Maya’s tears. Then she bent her knees and stroked Lynia’s little head as she continued, “If you ever feel like being a maid again, you’re welcome anytime. The Leinsters will always have a place for Maya Mato. But keep your priorities straight. My honored mother said that she wants you ‘to give the little one all the love you can and more,’ so put Lynia first for now. But when you do come back to us...how would you like to be head maid?”

This last remark elicited a baffled “What?!” from Maya and a smiling “My lady?” from Anna, while the current second-in-command announced, “I, Romy, am determined to be the next head maid.” A hint of tension pervaded the gathering.

“But you’re too fond of mischief, Anna. And Romy, I hear you went on a rampage in Etna and Zana,” my dear sister said, looking wicked. “It strikes me that promoting Maya would be the best way to ensure my future peace of mind.”

“L-Lady Lydia,” Maya stammered, “I’m not worthy.”

“My mischief is trifling!” Anna protested. “And due wholly to my abiding love for you, my lady! My devotion runs deep—deeper than the deepest depths of the Water Dragon Sea! And to think that my affections have been lost on you. Oh, it brings tears to my eyes.”

“My lady!” Romy joined in. “I admit to a bit of rampaging, but with good reason. And what do you mean about your future? Oh! A-Are you referring to your married life with Mr. A—”

“Loose lips sink ships, Romy,” my dear sister said, quickly clamping her hand over the maid’s mouth.

Then, all four women looked at each other and started giggling. I felt a little surge of joy, as if I'd returned to my childhood. Back then, my dear sister would only open up to a small handful of people, including Maya and Anna. And my dear brother had changed all that!

While I was lost in thought, Anna's expression sobered slightly. She released my dear sister's hand, turned to face us, and said, "I have one matter to report. The long-vacant position of number three in our corps has recently been filled."

"So I've heard," my dear sister replied. "But is she really up to the job?"

"Her ability is beyond reproach," Anna said. "Taken overall, I consider her the ablest maid in the corps."

"But she does get a trifle carried away," Romy added. "If you would only talk some sense into her, my lady."

"About her tendency to resort to unreasonable measures in pursuit of her desi—*objectives*," Maya clarified. "Please."

What could drive the three finest maids in my house's service to make a request like this? I can't imagine what rash excesses she's been getting up to in the former principalities.

My dear sister pulled a face. "No. I don't want to see her."

"Please, my lady. Won't you reconsider?"

"N-O!"

Despite my dear sister's firm refusal, she was hardly on bad terms with the new number three. In fact, they were well acquainted. The girl in question had been a dependable elder sister to us, always willing to speak freely even to my dear sister. Not that I would ever say so—it would go straight to her head. My dear sister was only avoiding her due to complications that had arisen during my dear brother's visit the previous summer vacation.

Anna breathed an affected sigh. "I suppose we have no choice. Go on, Romy."

"Yes, just as we planned," her second-in-command replied with equal ostentation.

My dear sister narrowed her eyes. "Anna, Romy, what are you plotting?"

"That, my lady, is a secret," Anna chirped.

"I beg your pardon, but I cannot say" was Romy's response.

"Oh really?" my dear sister said after a pregnant pause. Plumes of flame began to fill the air in response to her anger. But then, to all of our amazement—my dear sister's included—they vanished.

"Lydia, don't make a fuss so soon after your homecoming," a voice said from upstairs. "Didn't you get your fill of violence out east?"

"The house won't hold up to your temper," another added.

At the same time, I caught an unfamiliar sound that I took for footfalls. Hadn't I heard something similar in the eastern capital?

"Mother, father," my dear sister said sullenly. I echoed her greeting with greater enthusiasm.

Our parents, Lisa and Liam Leinster, slowly descended the staircase. Our dear father, a gentleman with curly red hair, wore his usual formal attire, but our dear mother was clad in a scarlet kimono, with distinctive eastern footwear to match! I couldn't suppress a cry of admiration.

Anna must have selected the outfit for her during our stay in the eastern capital. That explained her conversation with Mr. Allen's mother at Central Station.

The whole maid corps snapped to attention as my dear mother reached the foot of the stairs. The maids in training were on edge.

"Return to your work," my dear mother commanded them with a wave of her left hand. What dignity! I was hardly an unbiased observer, but she was just so cool.

"Lydia, Lynne, welcome home," she continued. "I hear that you've been working hard. I've been having Allen provide me with in-depth reports."

"You have?" my dear sister said slowly as all but the ranked maids and Maya filed out of the hall to resume their tasks.

Whenever did he find the time?

"He's an impressive man," my dear father joined in. "His report reached us here five days after your battle with Gerard. He must have dispatched it in secret by black griffin on that fourth night."

"The *fourth* night? He was unconscious in his hospital room until the night before that." My dear sister slowly shifted her gaze to the head maid. "Anna?"

"I merely complied with Mr. Allen's request," Anna replied, hanging back from the group. "He also sent similar documents to the Ducal House of Howard."

The head maid's confession provoked another low "Oh really?" from my dear sister. I shared her outrage. That battle had left my dear brother unconscious; how could he have written reports to both ducal houses so soon after waking?! He must only have had a few moments to himself, given the constant stream of people in and out of his sickroom. My cheeks puffed up with indignation.

Dear brother, how could you?

"He drives himself too hard. I'll have to scold him when next we meet," my dear mother said, breathing a sigh. "I've just been puzzling over how I can make amends to Ellyn."

"He quite literally saved the kingdom this time," my dear father added, frowning. "Ordinarily, his achievement would be impossible to deny. But given the circumstances, we cannot make the facts public."

Former Second Prince Gerard Wainwright had plotted a rebellion with the aid of William Marshal—called the "Black Knight"—and other former knights of the kingdom. And they had launched their coup in the eastern capital, right under the eyes of the Ducal House of Algren. That was a major incident by any standard.

I had been unable to join in the battle myself, and although my dear brother was not forthcoming, he reported that the rebels had been well armed. It was only natural to assume that they had powerful backers.

And my dear sister now housed the great spell Blazing Qilin, while its fellow, Frigid Crane, lived within Tina. Historically, great spells were known to have leveled cities in a single blow. We could not allow such destructive magic to inhabit them unchecked.

"Even the professor and his fellows wrote that word of this matter should be 'suppressed to the greatest extent possible.' And that 'the great spells pose no threat for the present,'" my dear father continued. "I share their opinion. Our best course of action is to maintain close coordination with Walter, the professor, and Lord Rodde. Walter and I have already written to His Majesty, and we will speak to him and our fellow dukes in good time."

The discussion had turned serious.

"Does suppressing information mean that Allen won't get any credit?" my dear sister asked, obviously disgruntled.

"Yes, it does. As with his past achievements."

"He seconded the request and asked that any public credit go to you." My dear mother took up the thread of the conversation. "But accolades can wait. We have no choice but to accept Allen's suggestion until everything is settled."

My dear sister began sulking and muttered, “Unbelievable. Simply unbelievable. That utter dolt.” I felt no happier than she did.

“Nonetheless,” our dear mother continued, eyeing us, “this is a matter for us adults to deal with now.”

“At Allen’s recommendation, we conducted a hasty survey of the military stores in the possession of the Ducal House of Algren, its vassals, and its forces conducting maneuvers near the royal capital,” our dear father added. “But none were provisioned for more than three months of peacetime activity—hardly enough to mount a major campaign. The next ‘battle’ will be a political affair, fought in the back rooms of the palace.”

“You’ve both done well. Rest easy during your stay here.”

My dear brother suspected the Ducal House of Algren?! His fears must have been unfounded this time; three months of peacetime supplies was simply too little to support real military action. My own house would have stocked at least a year’s worth of matériel, and I was sure that the Howards would have done the same.

Be that as it may, I couldn’t believe what he had been getting up to during his hospital stay. I felt just a bit miffed. Beside me, my dear sister was in the throes of out-and-out displeasure.

“Lydia,” our mother said, “you weren’t thinking of trying to make Allen take responsibility for this business with the great spells, by any chance?”

My dear sister’s eyes widened. “I was not,” she finally replied.

“Truly?”

“O-Of course.”

“Oh. He offered to in his letter, you know.”

This last revelation plunged my dear sister into the depths of confusion. “Huh? What? Whaaat?!” she cried, all traces of her usual dignified manner vanishing as she fretted like any other teenage girl.

Our dear mother took a long look at her before saying, “But if you don’t want him to, then I suppose that won’t be necessary. You won’t mind if I send him a refusal on your—”

“No!” my dear sister yelled. An instant later, she flushed bright red from the neck up, let out an extended groan, and cowered on the spot, hiding her face in her hands. Then she started shaking her head in denial.

What a charmingly naive reaction! Although I’m hardly an unbiased *observer.*

One word from my dear brother left her in shambles. I doubted that I could have been anywhere near as adorable had I been in her shoes.

Wait...

"But knowing my dear brother, wouldn't he have written the same thing to Tina?" I asked.

My dear sister froze.

Our dear mother gave a strained grin and waved her right hand. "Lynne, there's such a thing as being *too* quick on the uptake. Anna, did you manage to record that?"

"Yes, mistress!" the head maid crowed, brandishing a video orb. "I captured every last detail!"

I could only muster a hollow laugh, while my dear father took care to remain aloof.

At last, my dear sister, who was through being cuteness personified, looked up and returned to her feet. She was sulking, although the nape of her neck was still flushed.

"Motherrr," she growled.

"Where's the harm?" our dear mother responded, chuckling. "Forgive me for putting you on the spot, Anna. Well done."

"Merely a maid's duty," Anna replied with an elegant bob of her head.

"Romy, I read your evaluation of the trainees. You may proceed. I'm certain that it will be a good experience for Lynne as well. Liam, I trust you have no objections?"

"Yes, mistress!" Romy said, overlapping with a "Naturally" from my dear father.

An experience for me?

While I pondered, my dear mother approached the former number three. "Welcome back, Maya. And this must be little Lynia. She's simply precious."

"M-Mistress, I'm unworthy of your concern," Maya said. "And thank you so much for giving your blessing to my choice of name."

"Don't mention it. But are you certain it was a good idea to name her after Lydia and Lynne? I hope she doesn't grow into a little ruffian."

"What?! M-Mother!" my dear sister protested. I couldn't help echoing her with a shout of "D-Dear mother?! Wh-Why am I included?!"

What a thing to say! Unlike my dear sister, I didn't go indiscriminately slashing and burning everything in sight! The two of us were united in the incensed glares we turned on our mother...but she was utterly unmoved.

H-How mortifying!

"By the way, Anna," my dear mother said, ignoring us, "I take it that you raised the question of our number three?"

"Yes, mistress," the head maid replied. "Lady Lydia refused, as expected."

"I see. Romy, will Etna and Zana run smoothly without her?"

"Yes, mistress!" the second-in-command answered. "Maya stabilized Etna during her time there, and it now measures up to the rest of the Duchy of Leinster both socially and economically. Zana still lags behind in terms of commerce, but we have firmly established public order."

"Then we'll proceed as planned. Liam."

"I've already spoken with the parties involved," my dear father said. "We ought to employ personnel where they'll do the most good."

My parents exchanged nods. Then my dear mother turned to us. "We'll transfer the maid corps's number three, Lily, to the royal capital at the end of the summer. You too, Anna, Romy. We'll need more people in the royal capital from now on if we want to keep up with other houses. Select the rest of your staff as soon as possible."

"Yes, mistress!" the two highest-ranking officers of the Leinster Maid Corps responded in enthusiastic unison.

"What?!" my dear sister and I cried, shaken.

Reassigning Anna and Romy was enough of a shock, but...Lily in the royal capital?! I felt most uneasy. After all, she got along so well with my dear brother.

"Mistress," Maya interjected after a glance at us, "I know it's no longer my place, but would you permit me to speak?"

"Maya, you devoted years of service to our house," my dear mother said. "I'd like to think that I'm not too full of myself to value your questions. Speak freely."

"Yes, mistress! I regret that I never had the opportunity to meet Mr. Allen myself. But given your decision to assign the head maid, her second-in-command, and even Lady Lily to the royal capital, may I take it that you've chosen to place your house's future in his hands?"

A tense silence filled the air. My dear sister took out her pocket watch—a gift from my dear brother—and ran her fingers over its surface. A faint blush colored her cheeks. Naturally, when Maya referred to "our house's future," she meant my dear sister. But I was every bit as much a Leinster as she was!

"Maya, you're laboring under a mistaken assumption," Lisa Leinster, the former Lady of the Sword, replied, sweeping her scarlet tresses aside with one hand. She bent down and gently stroked the sleeping Lynia's little head while she gave my dear sister and me a look that seemed to say, "You girls understand, don't you?"

Then my dear mother rose calmly to her full height and declared, "The Leinsters won't choose that boy. That decision rests with him—with Allen. He's destined for greatness, and no ordinary girl will be able to keep a place at his side. If we rest on our laurels, some other house's daughter is certain to snap him up."

*

Lightningday arrived before I knew it. The first four days since our return to the southern capital had been tranquility itself. But after spending the past few months in almost daily contact with Tina, Ellie, and my beloved, dear brother, I found my vacation rather dull—with the sole exception of the morning duty that my dear mother had assigned to me.

"I can do this!" I told myself. Then, after a deep breath in and out, I rapped deliberately on my dear sister's bedroom door.

Once again, my knock went unanswered. I attempted to open the door, but it wouldn't budge.

"Locked? And these spells are uncalled for, no matter how much she wants to sleep in," I grumbled, racking my brain for a countermeasure.

Should I force my way in using magic? No, that wouldn't work. Her defenses seemed resilient enough to repel even my Firebird.

My sword, then? Even less feasible. I might even break my blade in the attempt.

Laughter cut my worries short. "Good morning, Lady Lynne," came a cheerful voice, followed by a nervous "G-Good morning."

"Anna, Sida," I replied slowly as the head maid walked down the corridor toward me. Accompanying her was a girl with glistening brunette pigtails—Sida Stinton, a maid in training who would be attending me all summer "for her education."

I had heard that Sida was fourteen, the same age as Ellie—and her bosom appeared equal to Ellie's as well. She had entered into service at our residence in the southern capital shortly after my departure for the Royal Academy, so we had never had a chance to meet. But after three days together, I had reached the conclusion that she was a nice girl, albeit a somewhat odd one.

Anna was her usual self, while Sida was worried stiff. I wished that she would hurry up and adjust to her new position.

"Anna, my dear sister appears to be sleeping in this morning," I said. "She'll laze around until evening again if we let her. Don't you think that the renowned Lady of the Sword ought to be more disciplined? My dear brother's absence can only excuse so much."

"Leave it to me!" the head maid replied with a musical laugh. It was time to see what she could do.

Behind her, Sida fidgeted, clutching the cross around her neck and muttering, "O Great Moon, Great Moon, wh-what ought I to do now?" I would have to speak with her later.

"Lady Lydia, it's time for breakfast!" Anna called, giving the door a firm knock.

Not a peep from within. What was her plan?

The day before, Anna had finally succeeded in luring my dear sister out of her room using the aroma of my dear brother's homemade pancakes, for which she had a special fondness. The head maid had apparently learned the recipe because she had "thought that something like this might happen." Even so, my dear sister had not emerged until past noon, and she had still been half asleep.

Two days ago, my dear brother's homemade seasonal vegetable soup had done the trick. Late in the day, of course. And before that it had been another dish of my dear brother's, his homemade—

"Oh my!" Anna exclaimed archly. "Goodness gracious! Do you intend to spend yet another morning cooped up in your room? Well then, Lady Lynne, I suppose we'll be the first to read this letter from Mr. Allen."

Anna's hands were empty, but I heard a noise from inside the room. Soon, the door was unlocked and swung open with a click.

Sida and I froze in spite of ourselves.

"A letter from Allen? A new one?" my dear sister mumbled, obviously still groggy, as she poked her head out. She looked somewhat childish and unsteady. Just saying “Allen” brought a blissful smile to her face.

B-But…th-this is just too unfair! I mean, my dear sister—the Lady of the Sword, the mightiest swordswoman and sorceress in the kingdom—is wearing pale-scarlet pajamas with animal ears on the hood! I…I stand no chance against her overwhelming, despair-inducing cuteness! H-How could my dear sister possibly wear such a—

My fairly excellent brain produced an answer.

“Did my dear brother give you that?”

“Mm-hmm. He loves these pajamas,” my dear sister mumbled in a singsong tone. She wore a smile of heartfelt joy without a hint of malice.

I felt so defeated that my knees threatened to buckle, but I stood firm. A muttered “O Great Moon, I don’t think that making me lose out so completely in girliness was a very nice thing to do” told me that the shock had been too much for Sida.

"Good morning, Lady Lydia," Anna cooed. "Now, it's time for breakfast."

"What about the letter?" my dear sister asked slowly.

"It hasn't arrived yet. Perhaps later today."

"Then I don't need breakfast today. And bring me lunch in my room."

She's so quick to indulge her lazy streak.

Anna winked at me. I took the hint and ostentatiously said, "I'm thinking of writing to my dear brother. I'll tell him, 'Day after day, my dear sister lounges in bed well into the afternoon. And she never even changes out of her pajamas!'"

"L-Lynne?!" she cried, her eyes widening. "I'll a-admit that I've been, um, a little bit lazy, but I am on vacation. A-And he's not around, so I want to spend all the time I can in the pajamas he gave me, so... Oh, fine! I...I'll change into something else! You just want me to get dressed and go to breakfast, right?!"

"I'm glad that you've seen reason," I said.

"Indeed! Now, let's get you ready to face the day!" Anna chirped as she pushed my dear sister into her room and shut the door behind them.

We won! But has there ever been a victory so hollow?

If my dear sister was to be believed, then all the pajamas she had worn over the past few days were gifts that my dear brother had picked out for her. How dare he play favorites.

The maid in training still had her hands planted on the floor as she grumbled, "O Great Moon, you're such a bully."

"Come on, Sida," I said, seizing one of her hands. "Stand up. A delicious meal will make you feel so much better! We still have our whole lives ahead of us! The best is yet to come!"

*

Early afternoon found me seated in a wooden chair in the inner courtyard, reading a letter from the north that had come by the swiftest of red griffins. I wondered if my own missive had reached Tina and Ellie yet. Regrettably, I had yet to receive a letter from my dear brother. Mail griffins were rarely late, but they were still living creatures; it was possible they were suffering from foul weather.

Although I was out in the courtyard, I had a roof over my head, and the ice and water spellstones worked into it kept me from sweltering. But I would still burn if I left my skin exposed to the sun, so I wore a light, white, long-sleeved shirt and white skirt that I'd purchased in the royal capital with Tina and Ellie. I was also using sunscreen. The sun's rays weren't terribly strong in the royal or eastern capitals, but this was the south. I couldn't be too careful!

I could practically hear a giggling Tina saying, "Why, Lynne, y-you're well done!" Ellie would no doubt follow with "Y-You look quite, um, charming..." and my dear brother with "I see you've done some tanning."

I'll never, ever *allow that to happen!*

I renewed my resolve even as I perused the letter. The notebook that my dear brother had given me at the station in the eastern capital rested on the chic little table in front of me. I was only on my first, so I'd need to practice later!

Tina and Ellie seemed to be enjoying their homecoming as much as I was mine. What was the northern capital like, I wondered. Though it was summer, they wrote that "the Azure Dragon Mountains are snowcapped again this year!" I couldn't picture that. We never got any snow at all here, for one thing.

I felt just a little bit jealous of the shopping trip that the two of them had apparently taken with Lady Stella. This vacation had taught me that my dear sister turned into a homebody in my dear brother's absence. They had gone everywhere together for the past several years, and she had been a recluse of a different sort before enrolling in the Royal Academy.

Just then, a nervous voice intruded on my gloomy reflections.

"L-Lady Lynne, I've b-brought you y-your t— Eek!"

"H-Hang on!" I cried, springing to my feet. I just barely managed to keep the maid in training from overbalancing with her silver tray, which held a glass pot of black tea and a little basket of treats.

"Sida, how many times must I tell you?" I asked the dejected girl. "Tensing up does more harm than good. Try to relax."

"Y-Yes, my lady! I b-beg your pardon," she said, bowing repeatedly.

"Now, pour me tea," I instructed, resuming my seat and taking a cup. "You are my personal maid during my stay, after all."

"L-Lady Lynne... C-Certainly!" She nodded, although she looked on the verge of tears, then picked up the glass pot and poured tea into my cup. Needless to say, her hands shook with nervous tension.

A pleasing aroma washed over me. Northern tea had its charms too, although I would only admit as much to Ellie, who had sent me the leaves. Miss First Place would boast that she'd had a hand in their cultivation.

I folded up the letter, carefully stowed it in its envelope, and picked up my dear brother's notebook. To the girl who was now trying to stand by, relieved that she had managed to pour my tea without incident, I said, "We went over this yesterday. Have a seat. Tea tastes better when drunk in company."

"Y-Yes, my lady."

The maid in training took the seat across from me. The look of complete astonishment on her face reminded me of the explanation that I'd received from Anna on my first day home: "Sida has the makings of a fine maid, but she has rather too low an opinion of herself, and she falls back on her faith too quickly. I hope that you can help her, Lady Lynne!"

She shouldn't ask the impossible.

I set my cup down on its saucer and reached for the teapot. Sida hurriedly attempted to rise, saying, "I-If you'd like seconds, then please allow me to—"

"That's not it." I filled a cup with the iced tea and set it down in front of Sida. Then I took two pastries from the basket and put one of them at her place.

"Huh? What? Whaaat?!" The maid in training began to panic.

"You're overreacting," I admonished her.

"B-But Lady Lynne, y-you're a daughter of the Ducal House of Leinster, and I'm—"

"This is more or less normal. Sida?"

"Y-Yes, my lady?!" The girl sprang to attention.

"You needn't stand. Have a seat." Once Sida was back in her chair, I looked her in the eye and said, "You've been in service to my house for several months now—too long to still be walking on eggshells. Why are you so nervous? If you have a reason, tell it to me."

"A-Anyone would be, I think," Sida mumbled, then hung her head.

Silence passed between us as I waited for her answer. With my teacup in one hand, I opened my dear brother's notebook and began conjuring one of his assignments—control formulae for manifesting two Firebirds at once—in midair. He had devised them himself. The addition of a second bird increased the spell's difficulty by an order of magnitude. I might struggle to cast it unaided.

After a while, Sida looked up and said, "You're Her Highness, Lady Lynne Leinster. I d-don't think you can expect a commoner like me to be anything but n-nervous around you! Everyone s-says so." The older girl let out a sob. She was on the verge of tears and was apparently even more anxious than I'd thought.

"Come on; don't cry," I said. "Who's 'everyone'? Your fellow trainees?"

"Th-That's right." Another sob.

"I see. Listen, Sida, you have some spellcasting experience, don't you? Come here."

"Huh? Y-Yes, my lady." The maid in training moved behind me. Then she gasped as I enlarged part of the formulae that my dear brother had devised and projected it in the air.

"This is a control formula for Firebird," I said.

"F-F-Fire— C-Can you cast it, Lady Lynne?"

"I can."

Sida shuddered, struck speechless. Of course, that wasn't what I wanted her to find astonishing.

"This beautiful formula was written by a person of humble birth, just like you," I said, running my fingers along the design. "In fact, he might even rank below you in social standing, given that his family has no surname. But he's still a more accomplished sorcerer than me or even my dear sister. I'm certain that his fame will one day resound throughout the length and breadth of the continent."

Sida froze, standing bolt upright. The look on her face said that she couldn't believe her ears. As usual, she was chanting, "O Great Moon."

I had asked Anna to look into that phrase and learned that the Great Moon was an ancient deity worshipped only in a small region to the east of the League of Principalities. My dear brother might find the subject interesting.

I dismissed the formula and smiled at Sida in the same way that my dear brother smiled at us students. "This kingdom is bigger than I thought. I may be a Leinster, but I'll still be left in the dust unless I work as hard as I possibly can. So try your best too, and we'll make progress together."

Sida's gaze grew steady with determination. "Yes," she said. "Thank you, Lady Lynne."

I was just thinking that she was on the right track when I sensed a massive surge of mana from the house, accompanied by the crash of something breaking. Despite her earlier tears, the maid in training spread her arms wide and prepared to defend me. Anna was right—she did have potential!

"Don't worry, Sida," I said. "She just likes to make a fuss."

"Huh?"

Without warning, a window in front of us shattered, and a young woman leapt out into the courtyard, her long scarlet hair, tied with a black ribbon, streaming behind her. She was clutching a snow-white object and making straight for us. Sida sprang forward to block her path, but the young woman let out a yelp of effort and bounded skyward. She then twirled in midair before landing behind the startled maid in training. Her ample chest, which made its presence felt throughout the maneuver, seemed even larger than I remembered it. True, she was eighteen, but I still felt it necessary to register my extreme displeasure.

The scarlet-haired young woman then sat down beside me, trying and failing to whistle. She wore a pale-scarlet top with a pattern of interlocking arrows, and a long skirt. Her feet were ensconced in leather boots, and a small barrette adorned her bangs. She positioned the white object in her hands—a snowy plush wolf—on the seat beside her.

I...I recognize this little fellow! H-He's a souvenir of my dear brother's time in the north! Did she t-take him from my dear sister's room?!

"Lily, when did you get back from Etna and Zana?" I demanded as the young woman took the liberty of pouring herself a cup of tea. "And where did you get that stuffed animal?"

"Wait juuust a minute; my throat is parched." She noisily gulped down her tea and then let out a contented sigh. "That hit the spot. Lady Lynne, I've just arrived!"

"Um... My lady, who is this?" Sida asked, blinking her big eyes. She had doubtless never met the scarlet-haired young woman, who was already scarfing pastries, since the newcomer had apparently been stationed in Etna and Zana.

"Lily," I replied, resting my chin in my hand. "I'm told that she replaced Maya as number three. Despite her outfit, she is a maid—at least technically."

"Humph! What do you mean, 'technically'?!" Lily griped. "I'm a maid, and that's that! The head maid and our second-in-command finally, *finally* gave me this lovely uniform to commemorate my promotion! All I need now is a lace hair band!"

"You call that a maid's uniform?" Sida and I blurted incredulously.

Lily was dressed like no maid I'd ever seen, although I could imagine her attending a girls school in that outfit. Knowing Anna and Romy, they were just dressing her up to their tastes. In fact, all of the veteran maids might be in on the plot. They were certainly all fond of Lily.

I made up my mind to drop the subject and lead the conversation into other channels.

"Lily, answer my question."

"Absolutely!" she replied in her usual singsong voice. "I just got back and finished reporting to the mistress and master. It's just awful out there lately! The Republics of Atlas and Bazel have been making so much mischief, and now they're marching their armies around along the border! The codes they're using definitely aren't from anywhere in the league either!"

"Yes, yes," I said. "So, did you manage to decipher them?"

"Only one 'yes,'" Lily chirped. "And we're working on it. Earl Sykes says it might be an old eastern cipher, and he's never dealt with one of those before. It seems like even he'll need some time to crack it."

The House of Sykes was an outlier among the southern nobility. It specialized in intelligence and espionage, and boasted that it would pull the wool over even the Dark Lord's eyes if necessary. It was also the house of my dear brother Richard's fiancée, Sasha.

"When I got to the house and went to say hello to Lady Lydia, she wouldn't open her door to me," Lily continued, pouring herself another cup of tea. “She left me no choice, so while she was busy simpering over a piece of notepaper and hugging it, I snuck in and abducted this little guy. I thought it might convince her to leave her room.”

The self-proclaimed maid was beaming with her hands pressed together. I grimaced.

“Honestly, Lily...” I said at last.

Then, that ruckus from the house must have been—

Another crash, followed by a blast of hot air, cut my speculation short. I turned to look, holding my hair in place, and let out a stunned exclamation.

A section of the house had been sliced clean through. And in the midst of the carnage stood my dear sister, Lydia Leinster, with her scarlet tresses fluttering and a look of rage on her face.

O-Oh no! She’s really furious!

“Sida,” I snapped, “seize that plushie!”

“Huh? Y-Yes, my lady!” Sida scooped up the plush wolf.

“L-Lady Lynne! New girl!” Lily cried, visibly shaken. “A-Are you really going to abandon me?!”

Positively murderous mana was fast approaching. I moved to take the plush toy and return it to my dear sister when a thought struck me—this stuffed animal was a gift from my dear brother. I glanced at my dear sister, who was coming ever closer, and then listened to her roar my name as I hugged the plush creature tight.

“H-How dare you!” my dear sister bellowed in surprise, while Lily followed another failed attempt at whistling with a cheerful “Nice going, Lady Lynne.” Sida babbled incoherently.

“Dear sister,” I said, “we were in the middle of tea. Would you care to join us?”

After a long pause, she replied, “I suppose I’ve got no choice. But first, give Allen back to—”

Silence fell over us all.

U-Um... I d-don’t think we were meant to hear that bit of information.

“Wow, Lady Lydia!” Lily exclaimed, pressing her hands together. “You named your toy ‘Allen’? It sounds like you love, love, *love* him as much as ever!”

D-Doesn’t this self-proclaimed maid value her life?!

My dear sister slowly raised her drooping head, and a tremendous pulse of mana shook the air as the supreme fire spell

Firebird took shape in triplicate.

"One, two, three of you heard," she said, counting us with a slender finger.

"D-Dear sister!" I cried. "D-Don't be hasty!"

"O Great Moon, wh-what did I do to deserve this?!" Sida clung to my right arm in a panic.

I knew it! Her chest is *larger than mine!*

Stopping my dear sister's shame-induced rampage proved to be a trial. To be frank, I thought myself a goner. But my dear sister seemed to enjoy herself, so all was well that ended well. Not that I would forgive Lily, of course.

I resolved to surreptitiously borrow "Allen" the next chance I got.

*

Before I knew it, it was Fireday—my eighth day back in the south and the start of a new week.

I was en route to a Leinster villa south of the southern capital. My dear parents and sister rode ahead in another carriage, while I shared this one with Sida, who sat rigid as a statue in the seat beside me, and Anna. A third carriage behind us bore more maids, including Lily.

The ride was a smooth one—my dear father kept the duchy's roads in good repair—and I spent it chatting with Anna. The carriage hardly swayed at all—but the same could not be said for my maid in training's pretty brown pigtails as she squeezed her eyes shut, clutched her cross, and murmured prayers.

"O Great Moon, d-don't you think this is all too sudden? I mean, the l-likes of me going to visit the f-former duke's estate... M-My heart can't take it. But Lady Lynne looks so charming in her uniform! Thank you so much!"

She's unflappable, after her fashion. And cut out to be a Leinster maid, I thought as I carried on expostulating to Anna. "So you see, Tina simply insists on getting in my way! Ellie is nice enough, but she has a bad habit of fawning on my dear brother whenever we're not looking. Caren clings to him like glue...although she seems displeased that he treats her so much like a child. And I think that Lady Stella has gotten simply gorgeous lately. I appreciate that my dear brother is kind, but there can be too much of a good thing!

And on top of that, I haven't gotten a letter from him! Is the weather over the royal capital really that awful?"

"Regarding griffin mail, that seems to be the official explanation," the head maid replied. "I'm looking into the particulars, but those postal services guard their secrets. Please be patient a little while longer. And Lady Lynne"—she flashed a knowing smile—"you might consider being more honest with your feelings."

I had a bad feeling about the turn our conversation was taking. Experience had taught me that Anna could be exceptionally mean at times like this.

"For instance," she continued, "how do you explain your search for dresses to match Lady Tina's?"

My eyes widened.

"Or your orders for the same ribbons that Miss Walker always wears?"

Alarm set in.

"Or your friendly exchanges with the two of them about eateries you'd like to visit with Mr. Allen?"

Panic took hold.

"Oh, friendship between young ladies is such a beautiful thing!" Anna cooed. "I simply adore it!"

I groaned. All my efforts at secrecy, wasted.

"Your countenance has softened considerably in these few months at the Royal Academy, my lady," the head maid continued cheerfully. "As one who has watched over you and Lady Lydia, I must thank Mr. Allen for that—and for the changes he's wrought in her."

I reflected on that for a moment. "I don't think that my dear brother believes that he's done anything at all to us."

I recalled his smile, gentle and serene. The memory alone was enough to warm my heart, which meant that I must be—

E-Enough of that. I shook my head to dispel the errant thought. *I've m-made up my mind to challenge my dear sister, true, but it's still, well…too soon for that sort of thing! Fortunately—well, no, there's nothing fortunate about it—my dear brother holds no title, so there's precious little chance of his being spoken for anytime soon. I should still have plenty of time. Anna, what's that smirk for?*

"U-Um…" Sida, still stiff as a board, made a noise from her seat beside me.

“Yes?” I responded—though Anna followed me not even a beat later with a peppy “Sida, speak clearly when you ask a question!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! Owie!” Sida sprang to her feet at Anna’s warning, struck her head on the carriage ceiling, and sat down again with tears in her eyes.

“So, what would you like to know?” I prompted.

“Y-Yes, my lady!” Sida let out a yelp as she leapt up and banged her head again.

“Oh, honestly...” I said, placing a hand on the head of the sobbing girl—who, I reminded myself, was older than me.

“L-Lady Lynne?” Sida asked, beginning to panic as she dried her eyes. “Th-The likes of me doesn’t deserve a pat on the head from—”

“Quiet.” I slowly cast the elementary spell Divine Light Healing. Sida’s eyes widened, while Anna let out an appreciative exclamation. I finished the spell, withdrew my hand, and asked, “Does it still hurt?”

Sida shook her head emphatically and stammered a “Th-Thank you very much.” My spell had evidently done its job.

I thought back to my dear brother’s lessons. “Don’t let elemental affinity and family tradition keep you from trying new things,” he had said. “Mastering even the most basic of healing spells will open up a wealth of new strategies to you.”

Over the past several months, Tina, Ellie, and I had learned to use at least some magic outside the hereditary specialties of our houses. I would need to keep striving!

While I fired myself up, Anna applauded. “Magnificently done, my lady!”

“Thank you,” I said. “Sida, what were you about to say?”

“Oh, right! U-Um...” Sida faltered but then seemed to make up her mind. “I’ve heard so many stories about how amazing this gentleman Mr. Allen is...so I wondered why he has no last name. If not even all *his* achievements are enough to earn one, then I don’t see why anyone else would even try.”

I couldn’t help but goggle at the maid in training.

“Well spotted,” Anna praised her. “I’m impressed that you picked up on that.”

“Th-Thank you, ma’am! I was, um, thinking about it myself too, but I also h-heard one of the older maids saying that ‘Mr. Allen can’t stay as he is.’”

“Oho.” A sinister light entered Anna’s eyes. Although she might not look it, our head maid took her job extremely seriously. My dear brother was practically family, and no Leinster maid would get away with saying such things about—

"Sh-She wasn't disparaging him!" Sida hastily added, picking up on our mood. "She said, 'To houseless beastfolk and immigrants like me, Mr. Allen is hope itself! He simply must move up in the world!'"

Anna and I shared a smile. My dear brother had apparently garnered more support than we realized.

"Sida, there are reasons why my dear brother hasn't risen to a higher station," I answered the maid in training. "It's a difficult situation."

"But it will surely change." Anna winked, picking up the conversation while she opened the window curtains. "In fact, I would say it simply must. And while Lady Lydia's role in that change goes without saying, Lady Lynne's influence cannot be discounted."

Our head maid was correct, but I wished that she were less quick to poke fun at us.

"I'll introduce you to my dear brother if a chance presents itself. It will all make sense once you meet him," I told Sida, who didn't seem to fully grasp our meaning. Then I returned my attention to Anna. "I was surprised to see you in the eastern capital. I take it that your business involved my dear brother?"

"It was most trying," Anna replied. "The mistress positively insisted on accompanying me at first. I hadn't seen her so distraught since Lady Lydia and Mr. Allen battled that black dragon."

"I see."

"A b-black dragon?!" exclaimed the maid in training as her eyes widened still further. She froze in shock and then began to panic. "A...A d-dragon? Like the m-messengers of the Great Moon?! M-M-My imagination can't take any more!"

It was like watching my past self react. Dragons, it seemed, were sacred to the cult of the Great Moon.

"Sida, calm down," I said. "I'll tell you all about my dear brother and sister's battles some other time."

"Y-Yes, my lady!"

Anna had delivered a hefty envelope from my dear mother to my dear brother's. And before my departure for the Royal Academy, I had seen mother in our courtyard, cheerfully perusing correspondence from my dear brother and his mother, so—

Suddenly, a thought struck me.

"Is it safe for my dear mother and sister to ride in the same carriage?" I asked the head maid. "My dear sister has been in a dreadful mood. She's still waiting to hear from my dear brother, her pocket watch suddenly stopped working yesterday, and she's been constantly touching the back of her right hand since this morning."

If the two of them fight...only my dear brother could put a stop to it.

"Not to worry," Anna said, laughing pleasantly despite my fears. "The master is with them."

"Do you think he'll deter them? It would be just like my dear mother to needle her at a time like this."

My house's head maid answered my worried look with a sinister one. So, my dear mother knew exactly what she was doing, and my fears about the conversation in the lead carriage were founded. I pictured my dear sister flushing crimson as she drew her weapon and wove a Firebird. She had set off with a second sword at her waist in addition to her favored weapon.

"That doesn't seem nice of her," I remarked.

"The mistress acts out of motherly love," Anna responded. "Lady Lydia ought to be more open with her feelings! She's known Mr. Allen for more than four years now. In that time, she has distinguished herself with so many feats of arms and other accomplishments that the Lady of the Sword now boasts not merely a national but a continental reputation. And Mr. Allen supported her through all of it. Only his public standing is lacking now."

"As I said earlier, I don't believe that my dear brother desires a title. I know that my dear sister loves him, but..." I felt the slightest of pangs in my heart. They were made for each other. I doubted that anyone could come between them. And yet, I couldn't bear to simply admit defeat.

"Fear not, Lady Lynne," Anna cooed. "No one knows what the future holds. But if Lady Lydia remains a lazy—*ahem,* pardon me—a *late bloomer,* then someone else is sure to run off with Mr. Allen before much longer. In my opinion..."

I drew in my breath. "I-In your opinion?"

Anna folded her arms and pronounced, "Lady Stella is not to be underestimated. She has the tenacity to see anything she sets her mind to through to the bitter end. Likewise, I hear that Miss Fosse has been closing in on Mr. Allen from a different angle. And the one who bears the most watching...is Miss Caren."

"I can understand Lady Stella and Felicia," I said, puzzled, "but Caren?"

My dear brother and Lady Stella certainly seemed to understand each other. But Caren was his sister, even if not by blood. They struck me as being close, but no more or less than that.

"How naive you still are, my lady," Anna said, wagging her finger.

"H-How so?"

She gave me a wicked look. "That's classified information. My investigation of Mr. Allen's taste in women revealed—"

"M-My dear brother's *what*?!"

Wh-Who could have imagined she's been studying such things?!

I gulped. Then Tina's and Ellie's faces crossed my mind.

"In short—"

I raised my hand to halt the head maid. "Don't tell me, Anna. It wouldn't be fair if only I knew. And it doesn't matter if my dear brother has a fondness for long-haired women with bestial ears and tails...as long as I win in the end!"

"My goodness!" Anna exclaimed, taken aback. "Dear me! Simply splendid, my lady!"

"Y-You're so dashing, my lady," Sida chimed in, gazing at me with reverence.

"Oh, and he does appreciate beast ears," the head maid chirped, confirming my conjectures based on the sleepwear that he had given my dear sister. "And what's more"—she whispered in my ear—"young ladies transform when they realize they're in love."

I felt more shaken than I had all day.

D-Does that go for me too? St-Still, my dear brother would never see Caren that way—or would he? They're alone together in the eastern capital at this very moment. Wh-Who's to say what chance circumstance could trigger— Oh!

The head maid was smirking at me. Beside her, the maid in training was grinning with her hands pressed to her blushing cheeks.

"Anna. Sida," I said slowly.

"I and the rest of the Leinster Maid Corps shall stand by you and Lady Lydia so long as we can see those amus—*ahem, dazzling* smiles on your faces!" Anna declared with a musical giggle. "Does that make sense to you, Sida? Then from this moment forth, you are a proud member of the glorious Society for Watching Over Lady Lydia and Lady Lynne in Public and Private!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Sida gave an exaggerated salute.

The nerve of them. I fixed the smiling maids with a sulky glare, but to no avail.

"What a delightful expression!" Anna exclaimed, brushing off my anger. "Come here, Sida. I'll teach you how to use a video orb."

"Y-Yes, ma'am! Oh, wow! I've never seen one up close before!"

Jeez!

I stared out the window, where farms had given way to forest without my noticing. Then the view opened up to reveal a field of flowers as far as my eye could see. I opened the window wide, stuck my head out, and caught sight of the villa—a redbrick building surrounded by red walls atop a low hillock.

Dear grandmother and grandfather, how have you been?

*

Once we passed through the villa's massive, thick steel gates, a short carriage ride brought us to the front of the main house. My dear grandparents' servants were lined up to greet us, although they really needn't have bothered in this heat.

"Oh, Lynne," a kindly voice called as soon as I stepped down from the carriage.

"Dear grandfather!" I flung my arms around Leen Leinster—a tall, slender gentleman with a soft smile and a sprinkling of gray in his curly red hair—as he approached from behind. He must have been at work, because he was dressed for farming and wore a straw hat on his head. One would never know to look at him that he was the former duke.

"Is it me, or have you grown again?" my dear grandfather asked, patting me on the head. "How do you like the Royal Academy? I hear you've made friends there. We're expecting another good harvest of that honey you like so much. What would you say to making sweets together?"

"Goodness, dear," a serene voice joined in from behind me. "How is she supposed to answer all those questions at once? It's good to see you, Lynne."

"Dear grandmother!"

"Dear me," Lindsey Leinster said as I left my dear grandfather and embraced her in turn. Like him, she was dressed in farming clothes and a straw hat—they were a close-knit couple. Her scarlet tresses were as beautiful as ever. My dear grandmother was about my height and youthful, although it was impossible to place her exact age. She could have passed for my sister, yet I found her radiant expression reassuring.

"I see you're eager for affection, Lynne." She giggled. "Your school uniform looks lovely on you."

"Most eager!" I replied. "But only with you, grandfather...and my dear brother."

"Your brother?" she repeated. "Oh, you mean young Allen! Isn't he with you this time?"

"He stayed behind in the eastern capital. But he gave me lots of homework!" I stepped back, then fished the handwritten notebook out of my bag and presented it. Its pages were jam-packed with exercises that ranged from silently casting a spell I found a bit challenging to conjuring two Firebirds at once!

"My. Now this is something," my dear grandfather remarked appreciatively.

"Most impressive," my dear grandmother added. "Lisa, will he be joining us?"

"That's what I'd like to know, but this girl keeps dragging her feet," my dear mother said with a glance at my dear sister. She wore a scarlet dress and had disembarked her carriage ahead of us. After a shake of her head, she turned back to my dear grandparents and said, "Father, mother, it's good to be home."

Behind her stood my father, looking haggard, and my dear sister, dressed in her guard uniform, with her fists clenched and her shoulders trembling.

O-Oh dear.

"What have we here?" Anna said. "Lily."

"Coming right uuup," the scarlet-haired young woman replied as she unfurled a parasol. "Get ready, everybody."

"Yes, ma'am!"

At her order, the maids all set about unloading tables and chairs from our carriages. As they arranged the furniture, Lily encircled it in powerful fire-resistant barriers many layers thick.

My dear mother ignored the proceedings and continued her report to my dear grandmother. "Allen has grown into a fine young man. I doubt that the royal family, to say nothing of the other ducal houses, will be able to ignore him for much longer. The Howards are already making their move. But Lydia is so immature for her age—I wonder whom she got that from?—that I'm beginning to worry."

I-Is now really the time to throw fuel on the fire?!

I slumped into my chair, and a white porcelain cup immediately appeared in front of me. Sida looked nervous as she poured me iced tea.

My dear sister had been staring at the ground throughout our dear mother's explanation. Now, she raised her head and snapped, "You! Have! Nothing! To! Worry! About! I have absolutely *no* intention of letting anyone else take him from—"

She hastily stopped herself as our dear mother and grandmother donned identical grins. It had all been a trap—one designed to trick her into voicing her true feelings.

"Well, if you say so," our dear mother said.

"Lydia simply *adores* young Allen." Our grandmother giggled. "I can hardly wait to see my great grandchildren's faces."

My dear sister, in contrast, hung her head. She neither spoke a word nor moved a muscle, yet innumerable plumes of flame began to fill the air around her, and her mana shook the ground. Sida yelped and clung to my back as cracks started to form in the villa's thick glass windows. Then my dear sister raised her head with exceptional deliberation, a beautiful smile on her face.

O-Oh no!

"A-Anna!" I cried.

"Certainly!" the head maid chirped. "This way, masters."

"Oh, yes, I see," grandfather responded. My dear father echoed him with less enthusiasm as they both retreated to my position.

"Should I move as well, Anna?" my dear grandmother asked as she removed her straw hat and held it in both hands.

"You're perfect just where you are, venerable mistress," Anna replied. "Allow me to look after your hat."

"Thank you." My dear grandmother let out a musical laugh.

Anna took the hat from her while the other maids fled to the shelter of the fire-resistant barrier. Sida babbled in astonishment as numerous overlapping walls of water and stone rose around us.

"Mother," my dear sister said brightly, "you've made a number of remarks recently. Allen and I aren't suited for each other. Some other girl will take him from me. He didn't join me here this summer because he's fed up with me. The list goes on. Don't you think you've said a little too much?"

"Do *you*?" our dear mother replied, cheerfully scathing. "Allen is constantly maturing, but the only things about you that have improved in the past four years are your swordplay and your spellcasting. I hope you realize it will take more than that to keep your place at his side."

The plumes of flame touched the barrier and scattered over the vicinity. I looked about me and saw that while Anna and the other veteran maids were their usual selves, all the newer girls and trainees—Sida included—had pale faces and chattering teeth.

"I...I know that!" my dear sister snapped. "B-But it's none of your business, so stay out of it!"

"I most certainly will not. Lydia, you're a little too dependent on Allen." Our dear mother sighed. "If you carry on this way, then Stella, or perhaps Felicia, will—"

Before she finished her sentence, a Firebird took flight with no warning whatsoever. Sida and her fellow trainees were too stunned for words. The ominous, all-incinerating bird was the symbol of the House of Leinster and the supreme spell of fire. Yet my dear mother sliced it in two with the edge of her hand, destroying it.

"What?!" all but a few maids exclaimed, flabbergasted by the spectacle.

"Goodness, how mischievous they both are..." was the only remark from my dear grandmother, who stood by watching.

I th-think your definition of "mischievous" is a little too broad.

My sister clicked her tongue and drew her two swords.

"Whatever shall I do with you?" My dear mother shrugged. "Anna!"

"At once, mistress!" The head maid tossed a pure-white parasol. How long had she been holding that?

With a beautiful gesture, my mother caught the parasol and leveled its tip at my sister. "I would have used a sword if Allen were here, but this will do for you alone."

"Fine by me!" My sister readied her swords for a charge, while our dear mother stood ready for her with a complacent smile.

I couldn't suppress a sigh. "Why must they always, *always* do this? Will you join in, Lily?" I asked the self-proclaimed maid, who was sitting in front of me, although I hadn't noticed her arrival.

"What? No way," she replied in her usual singsong tone.

"Fighting both of them would be like asking for death."

"Watch closely, Lady Lynne," Anna interjected. "They're about to start."

I looked up just as my dear sister lunged forward at incredible speed. A Firebird appeared above our mother, diving straight down at her. She unfurled her parasol in the path of the avian terror, which disintegrated in the collision.

My sister leapt and twirled, bringing her swords down diagonally at the end of one full rotation. "Have at you!"

"Is that any way to speak to your own mother?!" Our dear mother reclosed her parasol and blocked both blades. The weight of the blow sank the ground, and the shock wave demolished several walls of water and stone. My sister's assault continued, but her flurry of astonishingly quick strikes was stopped with ease.

A horizontal sweep became a double thrust became an unconventional slash. The two swords moved as though they had a life of their own. I doubted that I could have blocked even their first strike.

Still, what is *that parasol?*

Anna nodded while she slowly poured tea into my cup and no one else's. Lily stretched, complaining that she was "so tiiired."

Her bosom really is enormous. Simply deplorable!

"Mr. Allen picked out that perfectly ordinary parasol in the royal capital," the head maid explained, her gaze fixed on Lily's chest and her face devoid of emotion. "I daresay the mistress's ability to block with it is a testament to her skill and mana."

I took a moment to absorb that. "But my dear sister seems quite serious to me," I said at last.

"Wielding two swords is a new technique for Lady Lydia," Anna responded. "But her strength varies greatly depending on her proximity to Mr. Allen. This outcome strikes me as quite natural."

"Oh, I think I know what you mean," I said. "When my dear brother is with her, she practically declares herself invincible for all to hear, but she really lets herself go when he's not around."

"She's like a different person without Allen," Lily agreed, sprawling her upper body on the table. "And much more prone to loneliness than you'd think. Just the other day, I caught her facedown on her desk over a sheet of notepaper, moaning, 'I miss you.'"

"Wow" was all that I could manage.

M-My image of my dear sister is taking quite a beating. I mean, this is all charming, but still.

Of course, she remained a force to be reckoned with even when my dear brother wasn't around. Yet a skilled opponent like our mother threw the difference he made into stark relief.

My dear sister fell back, perhaps realizing that she was making no headway. Our mother once again unfurled her parasol, apparently content to wait. The maids, being fast workers, took the opportunity to reinforce their walls of stone and water.

"Goodness, you two seem to be enjoying yourselves," said my dear, smiling grandmother, who continued to watch from the sidelines. "Would you mind if I joined you?"

Yikes. Even she's fired up now. Oh, dear brother! How I wish you were here!

My dear sister glanced at our grandmother, then shifted her swords into a defensive stance and fixed our mother with a glare. "I have my own ideas," she said. "Don't tell me what to do, mother."

"You realize I was sixteen when I abducted Liam? And Richard was born just—" Another Firebird cut our dear mother's words short, but she crushed its head with her bare hand.

Sida was teetering behind me, evidently too shocked to speak. The other new maids seemed in equal danger of fainting. The veterans, in contrast, were crying out in excitement. "How dashing Lady Lydia looks!" "And the mistresses too!" "We may never get another chance like this! Record away!" A chorus of "Yes, ma'am!" greeted this last shout; they were so quick to adapt.

My dear sister stamped, let out a shout of frustration, and yelled, "Mother! Wh-Why do you say things like that?! You're the Duchess Leinster, so try to act like it!"

"I do; that's *why* I say such things. Don't pretend that you don't get your hopes up whenever you spend a night at Allen's lodgings," our dear mother replied. "Oh, but just so you know, he won't try anything. I was quite clear with him on that point."

My dear sister ground her teeth. One seldom saw Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, at such a disadvantage.

A-And by "try anything," did she mean... I-It's too soon for that!

"I think I was sixteen myself when I carried off Leen," my dear grandmother interjected, hefting a nearby broom and twirling it. "Do you have something against that young man, Lydia?"

"Of course not!" my sister shouted, swinging her swords in alarm. “I could never hate him! Not even if the world ended! Allen is my one and only—” She stopped herself suddenly in mid-tirade and blushed bright red.

Her boundless, unswerving love for my dear brother elicited pronouncements from our dear mother and grandmother.

“Then you have your answer. If only you had a spine.”

“Love is all about offense. Never stop pressing the attack.”

My dear sister groaned, hung her head, and trembled in shame. Without my dear brother, these two were more than a match for her even in an argument. Which meant that what came next would be...

“Anna!” I cried. “Anna!”

“Anna, at your service,” the head maid crooned, still recording with her video orb as she approached me.

“Strengthen the walls and barriers! I’ll help too!”

“Certainly. Lily, we have work to do.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the young woman who had been lounging beside me. She rose to her feet, and that simple action made...made her chest *jiggle*!

While I grappled with feelings of defeat, Lily set about adding to her magnificent fire-resistant barriers, oblivious to the vengeful glares that Anna and most of the other maids directed at her bosom. I snapped out of my gloom and joined in, while the maids thickened their ramparts of water and stone. At almost the same moment that we completed our fortifications...my dear sister slowly raised her head. Her pasted-on smile genuinely frightened me.

An artless swing of her swords filled the air with blazing plumes, which transformed into fiery daggers before making contact with our defenses. They pierced through dozens of stone and water walls with ease and cut halfway through the fire-resistant barriers before dissipating.

H-Her mana beggars belief.

Sida finally reached her limit and fainted with a little sigh. Other inexperienced maids soon followed her example. The veterans cared for their young colleagues without ever setting down their video orbs. What an awful habit they’d acquired.

“Mother,” my sister said brightly, “today, I’ll show you no more mercy.”

“Oh really?” our dear mother replied with equanimity, matched by a cheerful “My, what a lot of mana” from our dear grandmother.

“I appreciate that you turn down so many proposals from riffraff for me," my dear sister continued. "But that has nothing to do with me, uh"—her voice dropped to a sudden whisper—"marrying Allen, so, um..."

"I can't hear you, Lydia."

"Don't tease her, Lisa. Deep down, she can't wait to be with her young man, and she wants enough children for a small orchestra." My dear grandmother giggled. "Oh, Lydia, what a daring girl you are."

Incensed beyond words, my sister crossed her swords and raised them above her head. A Firebird appeared and entered a steep dive, only for her to absorb its flames into herself. Two wings of fire sprouted from her back as both her blades shone scarlet. She was performing our house's secret art, the Scarlet Sword, with *two* weapons?!

Our dear mother sighed and rubbed her forehead. "How could you use the Scarlet Sword against your own mother?"

"Now, now," our grandmother said, smiling. "She's made good progress."

"Mother. Grandmother," my dear sister said. "You'll pay for this, and tears won't save you."

O-Oh dear. Sh-She's furious.

Her rage was burning my skin through at least a hundred fire-resistant barriers. One word from my dear brother would have convinced her to stop, but...

Oh! O-Of course! My dear father and grandfather are here! Two generations of Leinster dukes can surely put a stop to— W-Wait, where are they?

"If you're looking for the masters," Anna said, responding to my look of confusion, "they said, 'There's nothing we can do here. Ask them to finish up by dinnertime,' and, 'We'll be resting from our daily toil.' Generations of Leinster gentlemen have been content to sit back and watch over the ladies of their house—a wise decision that we must strive to emulate!"

The head maid's ideas were as baffling as ever.

At that point, a maid with pale-blue hair emerged from the house and said something to Lily, who replied, "What? From Emma?"

"Yes, ma'am. Please come at once."

The startled young woman raced indoors with her long, scarlet hair fluttering behind her.

Had something happened in the royal capital? Emma, our Maid Corps's number four, was assisting Felicia there.

A torrent of mana drew my gaze back to my dear sister, who was leaning forward and holding her swords behind her as her blazing wings grew in power.

"You're hopeless," our dear mother said, ostentatiously holding out her open parasol. "Still, are you certain?"

"It's too late to beg for your life," my sister responded, looking puzzled.

"Allen picked out this parasol in the royal capital, you know. It can't withstand that strike. The next time I see him, I'll have to say that you threw a temper tantrum and burned it up."

My dear sister staggered as if struck. "C-Coward! H-How dare you hide behind him?!"

"I'm not the one who brought swords into this. Now, I'm waiting. If you won't come to me..." Our mother took a step forward. Instantly, she was right in front of my dear sister, who recoiled from a rapid thrust of her closed parasol and fell back.

"Goodness, Lydia, your concentration is slipping." Our dear grandmother raised her broom and unleashed a scarlet Firebird—a supreme spell from Lindsey Leinster, also known as "Scarlet Heaven," who had toppled the former Principality of Etna in a mere three days!

My sister didn't even have a chance to evade before the Firebird crashed into her head-on. Yet she was still the unrivaled Lady of the Sword. Her blades cleaved through the spell, filling the air with swirling flames that demolished several of our barriers. I set about systematically reinforcing the rest.

Where is Lily when—

The scarlet-haired young woman rushed out of the house and whispered something in Anna's ear. They both looked...anxious?

My dear sister retreated again to regain her balance.

"You made cutting that look easy, Lydia!" our dear grandmother exclaimed. "You really have grown. Is this young Allen's influence, I wonder?"

"It's also a weakness," our dear mother added. "Lydia, your back is wide open." She had already circled around my sister, who hastily looked over her shoulder and attempted to intercept using her wings of flame. But our dear mother scattered them with her parasol.

It was then that Anna and Lily intervened.

What?

"Forgive my impertinence," the head maid said, still gripping my dear mother's hand.

"It's an emergency!" Lily cried, doing the same with my dear sister.

The sight of their bloodless faces caused my dear mother to lower her parasol. Then my dear sister dispelled her wings and sheathed her swords.

"What's happened?" my mother asked.

"Are you all right, Lily?" my grandmother added with evident concern. "You look pale."

My dear sister took out her pocket watch, which had stopped working the day before, and started restlessly opening and closing its lid.

"Please," Anna said heavily. "Please listen calmly to what I am about to tell you."

When Anna finished speaking, silence reigned over the gathering that had been so lively just moments before. I couldn't stop myself from trembling.

No. I-It can't be true. Why would their house do such a thing to the royal capital? And...And to...

My dear sister had been staring at her pocket watch throughout the explanation. But before Anna finished, she had abruptly closed its lid and started running away from the house.

"Lydia, where are you going?" our dear mother had asked, seizing my sister's slender left arm while we rushed to her side.

"You have to ask?" she had replied, struggling to keep her emotions in check. "I'm going to the eastern capital. Where Allen is. Where I belong."

"You must realize that it's...it's too late," our dear mother had argued, although her eyes were just as frantic. "We ought to focus on gathering intelligence for now."

My sister shook her left arm free and muttered, "I know that. But...But...But...!"

Mother took her by the hands and faced her head-on. "Lydia, calm down. Don't worry. It will be all right, I promise. Allen is a strong boy—the strongest. You should know that better than anyone."

A single tear ran down my dear sister's cheek. Then, in a strained but heartfelt voice, she said, "Mother, if I lose him—Allen...how am I supposed to go on living? How could I keep walking in a pitch-dark world without him? He's... He's... He's the one who saved me! He's my one and only..."

That was her limit. That day, my dear sister—Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, unrivaled in strength, nobility, dignity, and beauty—went back to being a frail girl and broke down in tears. The report that had caused her transformation was ill news indeed:

"Rebellion by reactionary nobles under Duke Algren. Royal capital and palace in flames. Lord Richard, his knights of the guard, and the Brain of the Lady of the Sword battled rebels in eastern capital—fates unknown."

Chapter 4

"Wow. I've heard the streets of New Town aren't safe for humans, but it's a gorgeous spot for a walk, Allen."

"You'll be fine on the main thoroughfares in broad daylight, although I wouldn't venture into the side streets. So, why a navy jinbei?"

Lightday morning found me in New Town, on the city's east side. I had time before the Spirit Sending that evening, and His Highness, Lord Richard Leinster—the albatross's elder brother and a vice commander of the knights of the royal guard—wanted to visit the beastfolk district during his leave in the eastern capital.

"Don't I look good in it?" the red-haired knight asked, doing a twirl. He seemed fully recovered from his injuries. "I considered a deep scarlet, but my subordinates were dead set against it."

"I see," I replied. "So you compromised your convictions."

"D-Do you really have to put it like that, Allen?"

We whiled away our time with idle chatter as we walked along a broad avenue, bound for a shop belonging to a friend of mine. Caren had been enthusiastic to join us, but I'd asked her to refrain. It was nice to have a guys' day out every once in a while.

"So, you know the owner of the place we're going?" Richard asked.

"Yes," I replied. "A childhood friend, I suppose you might say. We can buy your knights something to drink while we're there."

"Oho. So Lydia's got yet another rival in love. And a childhood friend... I'm impressed."

"He's a man," I informed the nobleman before he took the conversation any further in that unwelcome direction.

"What?!" The red-haired knight reeled—and two little girls who were walking ahead of us, being led by a fox-clan woman, turned to watch and mimic him. I gave them a little wave, which they returned.

"H-How old is he?!" Richard demanded. "You know the way you have with younger people. If he's younger than you—"

"He's nineteen," I said.

"Impossible!" He made another exaggerated gesture, which the little girls once again imitated.

"Look," I said. "The children are watching."

"Hm? Drat! I should have *really* hammed it up! But thanks for your support!" The vice commander gave the girls a big wave, and they waved back with more enthusiasm than before.

Humph.

I crooked my left index finger and cast a little spell. Several rainbow-colored bubbles floated skyward. Once I made certain that the girls were watching them with delight, I transformed the bubbles into a menagerie of animals, griffins, and dragons, along with buildings and trains. The girls leapt up and down, cheering. I dispelled the bubbles and took a bow, and everyone in the vicinity erupted in applause.

Wh-What? I only meant to entertain those children.

"You ought to show the girls that side of you," Richard remarked, grinning at me.

"Let's be on our way," I said, resuming my walk.

The girls smiled at us, as did the woman I took to be their mother, so the performance had been worth the embarrassment.

"Hello!" I called as I passed through the short curtain over the entrance to the old, wooden shop. The sign out front read "Sui's."

"Yowch!" a man cried from the back of the store. A woman's voice that I didn't recognize responded with a chiding "Don't be in such a hurry." I heard running feet, and then a tall, fierce-eyed young fox-clan man burst into the room, still hurriedly straightening his kimono.

"A-Allen?" he said. "You're the last person I expected."

"Sui," I responded, "I promised to visit when we met on the canal the other day, remember? But if you're busy, I'll come back another time."

"Wait! You might as well come on in. I just so happen—just so happen, mind you—to have some excellent liquor."

"Tonight is the Spirit Sending—won't you be out with the militia? This is His Highness, Lord Richard Leinster. He's staying in the city."

"What, you're too good to drink with— D-Did you just say *L-Lord* Richard Leinster?!" the young man screamed before subsiding into stunned silence. I clapped, while Richard grinned awkwardly.

"What a magnificently unaffected reaction," I said. "Richard, this is Sui of the fox clan. If it's food you need, he's your man. Now, Sui, about today... Sui?" My fox-clan friend remained unresponsive. I had apparently given him too great a shock. "Oh well. Richard, let me tell you a tale of a certain merchant's romance with—"

This finally roused Sui. "Why don't I tell him about when you were a kid?" he said, patting me on the shoulder. "Like that time our master taught you to handle yourself in a fight?"

"Every beastfolk in the capital knows the story," I continued, unfazed. "I believe his exact words were 'Be mine!'"

"J-Just tell me what you want!" Sui yelled, furiously scratching his head as he less-than-subtly changed the subject.

"Two things. First, I'd like you to deliver liquor to the royal guard garrison on the western outskirts of the city. Richard, how many are there?"

"One hundred and seventeen," Richard replied. "I'd like to do a little something to reward them, since we'll all be heading back to the royal capital the day after tomorrow."

"H-Hang on," Sui protested. "Today's the Spirit Sending, remember? No carts on the streets."

"Don't worry; I'll bring my burliest knights," the vice commander reassured him.

After a moment of silence, Sui asked, "What's the second thing?"

I brushed off my friend's baleful glare and handed him a folded paper from my pocket.

"An order form?" he said, still glowering. "It can't be for much if— Allen." The young fox-clan man sank into a crouch, clutching his head in his hands, then suddenly sprang up and seized me by the collar. "Wh-Wh-What do you need this kind of volume for?! A-And for delivery to *Allen & Co.* in the royal capital?! Y-You've got some explaining to do!"

"Dear, you mustn't shout," a clear voice interjected as a human woman emerged from the back rooms. The tall southerner had glossy, jet-black tresses and a rather dark complexion, and she was wearing a floral-print kimono. She gazed at Sui with perfect serenity. I put her age at around twenty.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said. "I'm Allen."

"Momiji Toretto," she replied, smiling brightly. "Hardly a day goes by without Sui mentioning you. Why, not long ago, he said, ‘I’m glad to hear that Allen’s out of the hospital, but he ought to give a thought to his friends. I’ve got so much I wanna tell him.’ And then—”

“M-Momiji!” Sui hurriedly stifled the raven-haired beauty.

“The Torettos are a major merchant family with roots in the eastern capital,” I mused. “And did I hear her call you ‘dear’? Sui...are you keeping secrets from me?”

My friend looked away, giving Momiji a chance to escape.

“Honestly, dear,” she said. “As you’ve doubtless guessed from my hair and skin color...I’m not related to the Torettos by blood. They took me in as a child. And just the other day, my adoptive parents ordered me to leave the house.” She hung her head and fingered the bracelet on her right wrist, her cheerfulness gone. Then Sui unaffectedly clasped her hand, and her face brightened. My friend certainly was kind.

“Still, that hardly sounds reasonable,” I said doubtfully. “Telling you to leave on such short notice.”

My fox-clan friend scowled. “Might be because I’m beastfolk. They showed up out of nowhere, said, ‘Take our daughter’ and ‘We forbid you to visit the royal capital,’ and that’s the last we heard from them. We went to their big house in the royal capital, but they wouldn’t see us. Something wasn’t quite right.”

“How so?”

Sui stroked Momiji’s head, seemingly without thinking, as he nodded and said, “I heard voices through the door. Mrs. Toretto was crying.”

The Torettos had a generation-spanning reputation for promoting capable people regardless of race and also boasted strong ties to the Ducal House of Algren. It sounded to me as though...they wished to keep Momiji out of the royal capital.

“So, have you two tied the knot?” Richard interjected.

“We’re engaged,” Momiji replied while Sui panicked.

“I see, I see,” said the red-haired knight. “What do you say to that, Allen?”

“I’ll return to the royal capital after the Spirit Sending,” I said. “Consider that order a wedding gift.”

“It doesn’t list a price,” Sui objected hesitantly.

“Name your own.”

“No thanks, then!” The young man thrust the order back at me, then crossed his arms and turned his face away.

"Excuse me," Momiji said, plucking the paper from my hands. After a pause for thought, she produced a pen from the folds of her kimono, jotted something down, and handed it back to me. "Will this do, Mr. Allen?"

I ran my eyes over the figure, which was, quite frankly, outrageous. "Will you turn any profit at this price?"

"That depends on the merchant's skill. But I have a condition."

"H-Hey," Sui cut in, "Momiji—"

"Be quiet for a moment, dear."

"Fine..." came the sullen reply.

I got a sense of the couple's relationship—Momiji was not to be underestimated. Richard was pinching the bridge of his nose, doubtless recalling his days in the Leinster household.

"What condition?" I asked.

"We will supply the goods," Momiji replied. "In exchange, I'd like you to attend our wedding ceremony."

"Momiji?!" Sui quite literally jumped.

"Very well," I said.

"Allen?!"

"Thank you very much," Momiji responded. "Then we accept this order. I take it that we ought to contact Ms. Felicia Fosse in the royal capital to work out the details?"

"Yes, please do," I said. "I wish you luck—she's a formidable opponent."

"I have every faith in Sui."

The young fox-clan man slumped dejectedly and grumbled, "Oh, come on. Don't ignore me." He hadn't changed.

The raven-haired beauty and I exchanged looks and laughed. Momiji slipped behind Sui and embraced him.

"I'm sorry, dear. Will you forgive me?" she asked. When my friend ignored her, a sadistic look flashed across her face. "Mr. Allen, Sui truly admires you. Why, not long ago, he was poring over an old tome, saying, 'Allen read this book. Did you know that red signal flares mean—'"

"D-Don't tell him!" Sui shouted, blushing furiously as he covered his bride-to-be's mouth again. "If you're done here, then get going!"

"See you," I said with a wave. "Richard, let's be on our way."

Sui folded his arms and clicked his tongue in annoyance, but his tail drooped lonesomely.

Just before I left the shop, I turned and said, “Oh, I almost forgot.”

“Y-Yeah?” my friend asked with a start. His sparkling eyes and wagging tail made it difficult to believe that he was older than me.

I withdrew a small notebook, scribbled off a memo, then tore out the page and levitated it over to Sui. “That’s my address in the royal capital. Stop by on your honeymoon; I’ll show you around the city.”

“Huh?! A-Allen?!” my friend stammered.

“Momiji,” I added, “please take good care of my junior fellow disciple.”

“I will,” she replied firmly. “I’ll stake my life on it!”

I felt a powerful sense of déjà vu. Someone had once told me much the same, I reflected as I set off after Richard. We still had several more shops to visit, since a certain shy, bespectacled head clerk had come down singularly hard on me. Then again, I had burdened her with a variety of requests myself, so we were more or less even.

I wonder if she’s found any leads yet?

*

“Aren’t you ready yet, Allen?” Caren asked impatiently from outside my room.

Am I? I wondered as I surveyed myself in the full-length mirror.

“Get ready; I’m coming in!” she declared. And with that, my yukata-clad sister barged through the door uninvited. Silence ensued.

“You look—”

“You look great! Victory is mine! Total victory!” she exclaimed in a sudden fit of passion, bounding onto my bed and rolling back and forth with a pillow in her arms.

I hadn’t been able to wear a yukata to the Summer Festival, but I had one on now. The slightly faded black garment was a hand-me-down of my dad’s, which my mom had burnt the midnight oil to tailor for me just a few days ago.

“Wonderful!” my mom crooned, laughing as she poked her head into the room, a video orb clutched in one hand. “What a handsome son I have! You ought to look your best for the Spirit

Sending."

I scratched my cheek and said, "Thank you."

Caren was still rolling around, giggling and singing. "Allen's yukata's a sight just for me. To-tal vic-to-ry!"

"Don't make up strange songs," I chided as I took her hand and helped her up. Then I checked my pocket watch—it was almost evening. "Mom, are you certain that you and dad won't be going to the Great Tree plaza?"

"The neighborhood canals are good enough for us," my mom replied. "And I'm sure that's just how Caren wants it."

"Th-That's—"

"Yes?" mom and I asked in unison.

"True," Caren grudgingly admitted. "J-Jeez! D-Don't tease me like that!"

At that point, our dad dropped by. "Allen, Caren, haven't you left yet? You both look great."

"Thank you," I said a little bashfully. Caren echoed me with no such reservations.

"Of course they do, Nathan." My mom laughed musically and swelled with pride. "You picked their outfits."

"I suppose you're right—especially since you picked them out with me."

"Nathan!"

"Ellyn!"

My parents went off to their own little world. They were a close-knit couple, and still passionately in love!

"Let's go, Allen," Caren said, squeezing my left hand.

"Let's. Mom, dad, we're leaving."

"Have a nice time. Take care," our parents said, gazing lovingly at us.

The Spirit Sending had a two-hundred-year history in the eastern capital. It had supposedly originated as a seasonal ceremony performed by individual families. Participants had simply released paper lanterns containing lit candles into the nearest waterway. So how had it become one of the biggest events on the local beastfolk calendar, rivaling the autumn harvest festival? Put simply, because the beastfolk had lost their great hero, Shooting Star, and many other brave warriors besides in the Battle of Blood River, which had ended the War of the Dark Lord.

On this one day of the year, those valiant departed spirits returned to the Great Tree. The belief had no basis. Most likely, the practice had begun as a simple ceremony for their eternal rest and gradually taken on its current aspect over a long period of time. But in my opinion, that was beside the point. People needed something to believe in unconditionally.

As we crossed the western connecting bridge into the vast plaza before the Great Tree, the weight of a head against my left shoulder snapped me out of my reflections.

"Caren?" I said.

"No brooding," she responded. "No brother who neglects his charming little sister has any right to complain about—"

"Oh, Caren!"

"Careeen!"

A pair of girls from the squirrel and leopard clans called my sister's name out of the throng. They held lanterns in one hand and waved with the other.

Caren gave me a look.

"We'll meet at the Great Bridge," I said, nodding. "You can trace my mana, can't you? If you're nervous, I could conjure a little bird to—"

"Jeez! I'm not a child!" declared the student council vice president. "Don't worry; I'll find you."

I waved to Kaya and Koko as Caren wove her way through the crowd toward them, and the girls waved back. Once I was on my own, I resumed slowly crossing the bridge. Lantern-bearing gondolas and skiffs crammed the waters below, standing by in case anyone fell from the plaza or one of the connecting bridges. When I returned my attention to the crowd, I spotted Toma of the bearlet clan and Shima of the hare clan walking side by side.

Do my eyes deceive me? They're holding hands! Congratulations are in order, although it took them long enough.

I reached the entrance to the plaza, where the militia was handing out palm-sized paper lanterns. As I came abreast of the group, I overheard its male contingent crying, "Toma?!" "How could you?!" "Traitor!" and other jealous gripes. Their female colleagues followed with "Congratulations, Shima," "Thank goodness," and "You men, get back to work! Congratulations, Chapter Leader." Both Toma and Shima served in the militia.

My turn came, and I received a small lantern topped with an umbrella from a man who exclaimed, “I’ll be! Allen! That canal I asked your advice about is going well!”

“Thank you very much, Rolo,” I replied.

The leopard-clan man laughed. Rolo was the captain of the militia, although architecture was his true profession. Beastfolk military might was a thing of the past—the militia was roughly five hundred strong, and its main duty was keeping the peace in the beastfolk districts.

“Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary?” I asked, just to be safe.

“Not especially.” Rolo paused and then said, “Actually, there was one odd thing. A few days back, the Ducal House of Algren wanted to know if the militia would be participating in the Spirit Sending.”

That was odd indeed. The ducal house ought to be well aware that the militia stood guard at this ceremony every year. Why would they make a point of asking?

“Probably just someone new overseeing things,” Rolo said, giving me a shove on the back. “Now, move along.”

I wasn’t convinced, but I made for the Great Bridge. Along the way, I passed communication orbs set on wooden platforms. Suddenly, the paper lantern in my hand lit up, and a wolf-clan girl stood before me.

“Welcome back, Caren,” I said. “Where are Kaya and Koko?”

“They said they’ll drop their lanterns from the plaza,” she replied.

“I see.”

I lit my sister’s lantern, and, after a soft cry of surprise, she hugged my left arm. “Thank you so much,” she said. “I had no idea you knew about that. ‘A man and woman who light each other’s lanterns are destined to be—’ Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“‘A man and woman who light each other’s lanterns are destined to be happy as long as they live’? I’ve heard that rumor.”

After an awkward silence, Caren said, “Allen, I hope you realize that sister-bullying is the very gravest of offenses.”

“I want you to be happy.”

“And I want you to be happy too. But not with Lydia!”

I shot her a puzzled look. “How does Lydia fit into— Oh, it looks like it’s time.”

Streetlights and hand lanterns went out across the connecting bridges, plaza, and Great Bridge, leaving only the soft glow of paper lanterns. Then, a dignified voice sounded from the communication orbs set near the streetlights.

"Once again, this day has come," intoned Ogi, the wolf-clan chieftain and overall leader of the beastfolk. "Two hundred years and more ago, we lost many valiant warriors. A moment of silence for their sacrifice."

Quietly, I closed my eyes. In the darkness, Caren took my hand, so I gripped hers in return.

After a period of silence, the voice continued, "Now, cast your lanterns into the great canal. May the heroic spirits rest in peace."

I dropped my lantern over the railing of the Great Bridge, and the hazy light floated slowly down to land in the canal. The water's surface was beginning to look like a field of flowers, with pale-emerald glows flitting through the enchanting scene. I supposed that people might have taken these lights for spirits, although they were supposed to actually be mana seeping from the Great Tree. They did look as though they were dancing merrily. As a child, this spectacle had cemented my belief in elementals.

I offered a silent prayer...then pain shot through my left arm. I turned to find my sister sulking.

"What did you just pray for, Allen?" she demanded, glaring at me through narrowed eyes.

"For mom's, dad's and your happiness, and to see my students again safe and sound," I replied.

"Throw in a prayer for yourself too. I prayed for you."

"Caren," I said, "you really are kind. I'm proud to be your brother. Thank you."

My yukata-clad sister reeled as though from an electric shock and staggered away from me. "S-Springing that on me with a straight face is c-cowardly. It's unfair," she protested weakly, clutching her hands to her chest. "Why, I...I..."—her words dwindled to inaudibility—"I love you."

Fireworks rose from the Great Tree behind us, dyeing the Great Bridge in light.

"What a lovely display," I said. "Come on, Caren, let's go home. What was that last thing you said?"

"A secret," she said after a long pause. "You're so insensitive."

Later, Toma and Shima, who had been drinking in the plaza, spotted me and put me through no end of hassle. Other militia members joined in one by one as they got off duty. The party ultimately dragged on late into the night, and I returned home with a sleeping Caren on my back. Needless to say, our mom gave me quite a talking-to.

*

I like sleeping, as a general rule. And since I was back in my childhood home, I felt an urge to sleep in. Yet...

"I can't help waking up like normal," I grumbled as I reached out and checked the pocket watch at my bedside. As I'd feared, I was right on time.

I got out of bed and quietly padded over to the washbasin. Even early risers like my mom were still asleep at this time of morning, and birdsong was the only noise outside. I took care not to wake anyone as I washed my face and brushed my teeth. Then I checked my face in the mirror—nothing amiss.

Silently, I returned to my room, dressed, and moved to the inner courtyard. After some warming-up exercises, I began my basic magical training.

First, I conjured spheres of all eight classical elements and then dispelled them. By repeating the exercise over and over again, I made certain of my spell formulae so that I could cast them quickly and silently in an emergency. I practiced again with two elements at once, then with three, four, five, and so on. The trick was not to rush.

Then, I moved on to several formulae that I had been experimenting with. After running through them all, it was time for one last spell. I waved my right hand, conjured a dozen or so little birds, and launched them skyward. Channeling lightning, wind, and light, I cast a far-reaching detection spell through the magical creatures and projected the results on a map of the whole city in the air before me. Part of the chart began filling in with the shapes of buildings and everything moving among them.

"I suppose I can't hope for much greater precision with my mana," I said. "I ought to teach Caren or Ellie to— Hm?" I couldn't suppress a stunned cry.

My map displayed an army advancing on the beastfolk districts. Not a single force, but multiple. They numbered in the thousands and might even have been over ten thousand strong altogether. My mind was in a whirl.

This was the eastern capital, right under the nose of the Ducal House of Algren. How could so many troops—

I broke out in gooseflesh as I came to the worst possible conclusion.

No, this is an Algren rebellion! And they're striking here, not just in the royal capital!

I waved my hands to conjure another several dozen birds and sent them winging through the air at top speed, bearing the urgent news to all concerned. Unless I acted quickly, it would be too late. I turned back to the house to wake my family—then sprang to one side as several chains and single-edged daggers flew from before and behind me, gouging furrows in the earth.

Five sorcerers clad in hooded gray robes appeared in the air before me. Strange spell formulae enabled them to conjure chains from thin air and use the constructs as footholds. I sensed more behind me and another four on the roof. So, I was surrounded.

"Are you certain you have the right person?" I asked, knocking the dust off my hands. "My name is—"

"The mock beast. The Brain of the Lady of the Sword. Come with us—our leader desires you." The foremost man, who seemed to be in command, readied his dagger, and his subordinates did the same. All carried identical weapons and wore matching robes.

"Stealthy, gray-clad assassins who conjure magical chains," I mused, recalling books I had once read. "Inquisitors—the dark side of the Church of the Holy Spirit. So, the church has a hand in this rebellion. And I suppose you supplied Gerard with great spells, arms, and funds. In fact, you were probably in contact with him from an earlier—"

"Silence him!" the commander barked coldly, and a storm of chains and daggers bore down on me from all sides.

I cast the elementary spell Divine Wind Wave from overhead, slamming the daggers into the ground while I dismantled the chains' spell formulae. That shook the robed figures, although I couldn't see their faces.

"I'm still waiting for your answer," I told their commander.

"Still his tongue at once!" the man bellowed.

As his subordinates charged, I activated the elementary spells that I'd been preparing. Divine Lightning Shots struck the robed figures from their blind spots, robbing them of consciousness, while

Divine Darkness Threads bound them. I immediately dispelled the inquisitors' chains and struck their commander to the ground. He landed on his feet as eight other sorcerers thudded into the courtyard. The man's hood slipped as he backed away, revealing an eastern face marked with strange designs on the cheeks.

"I didn't sense your casting," he said, trembling as he retreated farther. "A-And you undid our magic? M-Monster!"

"How rude," I responded. "Now, tell me—what brings you here?"

The tense silence that followed was broken by a stunned "Allen?" My mother, Ellyn, was awake and on the veranda.

"Mom!" I cried as the man hurled a dagger at her without hesitation.

It took all my agility to intercept the projectile. By the time I looked back, the man was running away along chains he conjured in midair.

So, he got awa—

Thunder roared as a bolt of lightning smote the inquisitor back to earth. Caren stood beside me in her nightgown, her hair bristling with electricity from the sudden spell.

"Allen, what's going on?" she asked, shocked.

I took a moment to compose myself. "Mom, wake dad. And hurry; there's no time."

"Huh? O-Oh, right. I understand." Our mom snapped out of her daze and rushed off, leaving Caren and me in the courtyard with the eight unconscious sorcerers and their fallen commander.

"As I was saying—what brings you here?" I asked again.

The man raised his face from the dirt and let out a low, derisive laugh. Then, laboriously, he said, "You expect me to answer that?"

"What?! He's still conscious after my lightning spell?!" Caren cried, nervously seizing my left arm.

"Brain of the Lady of the Sword," the commander continued, "you are a threat. I can see why our leader takes an interest in you. Thus...die!"

"Caren!" I shouted. "Raise the strongest barrier you can muster!"

"O-On it!"

The man and his unconscious comrades began to shine with a baleful light. Mana swelled as they floated off the ground. Were they planning to go out in a blaze of glory?! I tried to interfere with their spell, but the formulae were heavily encrypted, and each one with a different cipher!

“We are defenders of the faith!” the commander boomed. “The Saint and the Holy Spirit will it so!”

The inquisitors’ bodies swelled abruptly, losing the capacity to maintain their proper forms. They were about to explode!

But in the next instant, they began crumbling harmlessly to ash.

“Why didn’t it...detonate...?” the commander asked, looking truly mystified as all nine assassins disintegrated.

Those spell formulae must never have been designed to activate.

“The Saint?” I murmured. It was the name of an ancient hero said to have healed the world with her great spell, Resurrection. But the Hero—that gentle girl—was supposed to be the only living heir to such a legendary title.

My little birds arrived bearing news. Part of the beastfolk district was already under attack. Unlike its counterpart in our kingdom, the orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit preached that beastfolk were “animals”...and didn’t regard them as people.

A tug on my left sleeve snapped me back to the present. “A-Allen,” my sister said, looking nervously up at me.

I placed a hand on her head—and then sensed more mana from inside the house.

“Allen, Caren! Come quick!” our mom screamed. “Nathan...Nathan is...!”

We both raced inside.

*

“Goodbye, mom, dad,” I said, turning to my parents in the entryway.

“Allen...” my mom called.

My dad, who limped slightly on his right leg, said nothing. He had spotted another gray-robed inquisitor sneaking in through the back door and had overcome the assassin using one of his handmade magical devices for self-defense. But the intruder had slashed his leg with a hidden dagger when he had gone to restrain the man. Then, the trussed-up inquisitor had turned to ash before my dad’s eyes—and all while I was at home!

I had cast a healing spell on the wound, but neither Caren nor I could effect an instant recovery. Linking mana with her would probably solve that problem, but she would assuredly come with me if I tried that. So, while I felt sorry for my dad, he would need to make do.

As it was, my sister stood beside our mom. She had changed into her Royal Academy uniform for the magical defense it offered.

“Caren,” I said, “take care of mom and dad for me. I’ll see you at the Great Tree.”

“Allen,” she replied, “I...I really think you should come with us! Or if you do go, take me with you!”

“I can save a lot of people if I act now. I can’t overlook them. And you can’t come with me. My destination is...a battlefield.”

“You’re always like this, Allen! You always treat me like—”

“Dad has an injured leg,” I reminded her. “Caren, please.”

She stopped shouting and looked at the worry on our mom’s face and the cold sweat on our dad’s. “Fine,” she said at last.

I freed the court sorcerer’s staff that Lydia had left me from its cloth covering. The scarlet and azure ribbons tied to its tip gleamed in the morning sun.

“Allen!” my mom cried from behind me, overcome with worry.

I raised my hand, waved, and set off to war.

I ran single-mindedly through the backstreets, employing botanical magic to speed my progress. The eastern capital—the “forest capital”—was in flames. Black smoke rose all over Old Town, accompanied by the stench of burning and the clangor of alarm bells.

One after another, my birds returned with information. Only the beastfolk districts were under assault. The human quarters were silent, but the massive clock at Central Station chimed incessantly.

The knights of the royal guard and most of the beastfolk militia had avoided a surprise attack, and a group of militia members was constructing an impromptu camp in the plaza before the Great Tree. Their leader was...Shima, everyone’s reliable big sister. Richard’s knights and the main force of the militia, under Rolo’s command, were rescuing the residents of Old Town. Another militia chapter was guiding the people of New Town to the eastern connecting bridge. Sui’s message said, “Count on me!”

None of the chieftains replied. Were they struggling to sift through information? In contrast, former chieftains and deputies such as Deg and Dag were quick to respond. They reported that the otter clan was organizing gondoliers and boatmen to evacuate people by water.

A plant brought me up to a rooftop, from which I could see ceaseless volleys of signal flares roaring up from the Great Tree. They were pitch black—“Enemy attack. Fall back to the Great Tree! Leave no woman, child, or elder behind!” I had learned about the signal flares in beastfolk school, but I had never expected to actually see one.

The middle of Old Town’s main thoroughfare came into view. Several dozen knights of the royal guard had already formed a shield wall against around a hundred rebel troops. Behind their bulwark, I spied several hundred beastfolk in the process of evacuating. Many were wounded, even among the children.

So, they’re giving no quarter.

“Richard!” I called.

“Allen!” he hollered back. “The Algrens are in revolt! We found documents proving their ties to Gerard’s—”

“We can talk later!” I leapt off the roof and struck the rebels from the rear.

Judging by their standards...this is an advance force under Earl Guesclin, an Algren vassal!

A sweep of my staff sent creepers of ice running along the ground to ensnare several dozen soldiers and throw the unit into disarray.

“What are you playing at?!” a portly mounted knight in the extreme rear barked, pointing his baton at me. “He’s only one—”

I bounded over the soldiers and struck the earl full in the face with Divine Lightning Shot, dismounting him. With another leap, I cast multiple Divine Water Waves in the air above the heart of the enemy formation. That left the soldiers drenched. I then used wind magic to control my trajectory, landing amid the front ranks of the royal guard. The butt of my staff struck the ground, unleashing the elementary spell Divine Lightning Wave along the street. The whole enemy formation burst apart as soldiers fell, flailing and groaning. Only the horse remained standing—I had made a point to spare it.

“Now it’s time for questions,” I said.

“Oh, come on,” Richard responded. But then he stopped himself. “Forget it. You’re Lydia’s partner. This probably doesn’t even count as a scrape by your standards.”

I shrugged, seeing that he had explained my attitude to his own satisfaction and that of the surrounding knights.

"Forgive me," I said, bowing deeply to the red-haired vice commander. "It seems as though I'll be making unreasonable demands of the royal guard."

"They almost took us by surprise, but your warning bought us time to move anyone who can't fight to the Great Tree. You have my sincere gratitude for saving the lives of my knights. I guess I'm in your debt again."

"Why 'again'?" I asked. "And you mentioned documents?"

"Someone tossed them into our garrison out of the blue late last night. They detail dealings between Grant Algren and Gerard," Richard explained. "Allen, is this rebellion...?"

I nodded. "The Ducal House of Algren isn't acting alone. We should assume that every hard-line noble of any significance in the east has risen up. I'm certain that they've also struck the royal capital by now. They have assassins from the Church of the Holy Spirit with them—some came after me."

A stir spread through the nearby knights. Religious organizations taking a hand in politics was almost unheard of in our kingdom.

Several of my birds returned. I scowled.

The chieftains want to "attempt to negotiate with the Algrens"? Under these *circumstances? What are they thinking?*

I set the thought aside and said, "Richard, let's fight a delaying action as we fall back to the Great Tree plaza. This main avenue is the only street in Old Town broad enough to deploy a line of troops, and the residents are supposed to follow it to the Great Tree in emergencies. We'll have to leave the rest to the militia."

"Got it," said the vice commander. "Knights, I shouldn't have to tell you this, but I'll reintroduce you just in case. This is Allen. Listen to what he has to say, or you'll have no right to complain when you wind up dead. Take that to heart!"

"Yes, sir!" The knights all beat their breastplates in unison.

I couldn't help but scratch my cheek. "Well then, let's begin by fortifying our position," I said, issuing orders to mask my embarrassment. "This will be a long campaign."

*

I blocked a sword stroke with my staff and twisted out of the way of a spear thrust as I delivered a lightning-infused kick to the gut of an enemy knight. He grunted, his bearded face contorting in pain, and fell to his knees. I used his face as a foothold to propel myself onto the roof of a house.

No sooner had I landed than a barrage of offensive spells bore down on me. I sprinted along the disintegrating rooftop and sniped at the sorcerers who brought up the rear of the enemy line with a burst of the elementary spell Divine Light Shot. I heard shrieks, followed by curses from the knights who made up the front line.

“D-Damn him!”

“The dastard only strikes at our rear!”

“No human should side with animals!”

The enemy’s banners marked them as the forces of Viscount Redolo, another Algren vassal. More numerous than our previous opponents, they were roughly two hundred strong. This was the third group we had faced.

Our encounters, coupled with my little birds’ reconnaissance, made it plain that the rebels were holding their main force in reserve and forcing lesser nobles to bear the brunt of this initial clash.

A textbook example of a piecemeal offensive. I chuckled to myself as I retreated along the rooftops to the allied position. *How unlike the Ducal House of Algren. We would have been helpless in the face of overwhelming numbers.*

As my spirits rose, I gave my staff a twirl and cast eight consecutive Divine Ice Mirrors. The rebel knights and sorcerers had their hands full with defense as their own offensive spells rebounded on them, ricocheting wildly.

“Richard!” I cried.

“Knights of the royal guard, advance!” he roared.

“Yes, sir!” The knights followed their vice commander’s lead and surged forth from their defensive position. Their perfectly ordered charge made short work of the enemy battle line.

I checked a fresh report from my birds as I surveyed the royal guard’s handiwork from my rooftop.

No good news.

The chieftains were still in disarray. Even the signal flares, it seemed, were the result of the militia in the plaza taking matters into their own hands. The evacuation of both beastfolk districts was proceeding, but it would take time. And to make matters worse...

"They want to 'recall the militia to the plaza for the defense of the Great Tree' and 'invoke the Old Pledge to initiate talks with the Ducal House of Algren'?" I repeated incredulously.

My heart sank. Unaided, the royal guard would be helpless if rebel forces swarmed the narrow side streets. And at this stage, a call to negotiate based on the Old Pledge was beyond absurd.

Down on the street, the knights raised a victory cheer.

"An indiscriminate rebel army before us and a council that refuses to face reality at our backs," I muttered. "Lydia, I've never missed you more keenly than I do today."

After routing Viscount Redolo's forces, we riddled our first camp with booby traps and abandoned it. We set more traps behind us as we retreated to our second encampment, which we had constructed closer to the connecting bridge. Richard and I brought up the rear.

"This is Rolo of the leopard clan, captain of the militia!" a voice called from behind us. "I hear Allen's about! Where is he?!"

The vice commander and I exchanged glances. There were no enemies in sight on the main road, and my scout birds indicated that their forces were in disarray—our fleeing foes had careened into other units standing by behind them.

The knights around us struck their breastplates and shouted.

"Richard, Mr. Allen, please go to him!"

"We'll fill in for you!"

"Any knight would be honored to serve as rear guard!"

"And most wind up de—"

"Someone shut this man up!"

The red-haired nobleman grinned. "I guess you leave me no choice," he said. "Allen and I will step out for a bit. Hold the fort while we're gone."

"Yes, sir!"

We left the knights to serve as rear guards and made our way down the avenue to our first encampment. Amid the bulwarks of tables and chairs taken from nearby houses, we found a sour-faced Rolo, lightly armored and carrying a halberd, in conversation with Richard's second-in-command—Sir Bertrand, I believed his name was.

"Rolo!" I cried, waving my hand wildly.

"Allen!" His voice carried well, and several other nearby beastfolk raised their hands in my direction, so I waved to them too.

"I'm so glad you're safe," I said as we drew closer to the builder moonlighting as a commander.

"Only thanks to your warning," he responded. "I take it you've heard the chieftains' orders?"

"Yes. Rolo, this is His Highness, Lord Richard Leinster. He serves as vice commander of the royal guard."

"I'm Rolo of the leopard clan, captain of the beastfolk militia." After a pause, he added, "Should I be speaking more formal-like?"

"This is a battlefield; no need to stand on ceremony," the red-haired nobleman reassured him. "I'm Richard. I presume you have urgent news?"

"Thanks," Rolo said after a slight hesitation. "I have my people standing watch on every street and alleyway. We shouldn't have to worry about infiltrators."

Richard and I silently nodded our assent. I shot a look at Sir Bertrand, and the veteran knight repeated the gesture. We then relocated to a nearby house. I cast spells against eavesdropping the moment my feet crossed the threshold.

"Rolo, Richard, it's safe to speak now," I said. "Is this about the order for the militia to retreat?"

"Yes," the captain answered heavily. "They wasted no time in telling us to fall back and make it quick."

"But it doesn't look like you've finished evacuating the district," Richard pointed out.

The indomitable Rolo grimaced. "There are still people in Old *and* New Town! But the chieftains remain holed up in their council room in the Great Tree, arguing away! They're all together because of the Spirit Sending last night, but they won't issue a single decent order!"

Unbelievable. The chieftains are actually exacerbating the chaos.

"Please have the militia retreat to the plaza as ordered, defending the remaining residents as they go," I said, letting out a sigh. "Richard, can you spare any of your knights? That should improve security and do a little to speed up the evacuation."

"What?!" Rolo exclaimed.

"Sounds like a plan," Richard said at almost the same moment.

"Allen!" the captain cried again. "Are you trying to get yourself kil—"

"I'm doing no such thing. This isn't my place to die," I interrupted, seizing Rolo by the shoulders and staying his outburst. "I promised my four charming students; a shy, bespectacled head clerk; and the ever-demanding albatross around my neck that we would meet again in the royal capital. And I promised to meet my sister at the Great Tree. So, I can't afford to die."

After a long silence, Rolo stood up straight and then bowed so low that he almost formed a right angle. "I understand," he said. "Your Highness, Lord Richard Leinster, I realize that I've no business asking you for a favor like this at our first meeting...but please, please look out for Allen. He has it in him to change the future of the wolf clan—no, of all beastfolk! A...A ridiculous farce like this can't..."

Rolo said no more. He only went on making fresh tearstains on the entryway floor as he shook from head to toe. Then I heard the sound of a breastplate being struck.

"Mr. Rolo, trust me!" said the vice commander. "I swear on my honor as Richard Leinster that I will never let Allen die."

"Lord Richard..." The captain of the militia raised his head and then lowered it in another deep bow. When he raised it again, he placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed it with painful intensity. "Don't die on me, Allen! I'll be back for you as soon as I get everybody out. That's a promise!"

"Thank you very much," I said to the red-eyed leopard-clan architect. "Don't worry; I'll manage."

A little bird flitted through the doorway. Break time, it seemed, was at an end. We exchanged nods, and Rolo raced out to rejoin the other militia members.

"What did you say that for?" I demanded of Richard. "I mean, really. You'll never let me die?"

"We could never have talked him into this otherwise. And anyway, I meant it. Now, let's move. We have work to do." The red-haired nobleman stepped outside—and despite my misgivings, I followed him.

"Sir! Mr. Allen!" Sir Bertrand called, rushing out to meet us when we arrived back at the second camp.

"Bertrand, form a squad of younger knights," Richard commanded. "They're to join the militia's retreat to the Great Tree."

"Yes, sir! I already have them picked out, but none of them are happy about it—especially not Ryan.”

“Ugh! Allen, I’ll have a word with them,” the vice commander said, then strode off toward the young knights.

“Won’t you fall back, Mr. Allen?”

“Just ‘Allen,’ please, Sir Bertrand,” I said. “Someone needs to stay behind.”

“Call me just ‘Bertrand,’ then. And must you be among the remainder?”

“Just between us, my father once told me, ‘Never forsake a friend, even if your friends forsake you,’” I replied with a wink. “And despite the difference in our social standing, I consider Lord Richard Leinster a friend. I refuse to lose him on this senseless battlefield.”

“In the midst of all this fighting, your concern is for Richard?!” the knight exclaimed, shocked.

“Bertrand, I’d like you to prepare to construct these,” I said, handing him a sheet of notepaper outlining sites for additional fortifications on the main thoroughfare.

After a moment of stunned silence, the veteran saluted and barked, “At once!” He then raced off and began gathering other knights.

Fluttering rebel banners were massing on the street before us. The main armies of earls and greater nobles were apparently entering the fray. The real battle was about to begin, I thought as I recalled the militia captain’s words.

“Don’t die”? I couldn’t suppress a smile. *You’re asking the impossible, Rolo. I won’t lose hope, but even if we make it through this, worse is sure to follow. Even so*—I swept my staff sideways, mowing down the throng of banners with a Divine Wind Wave—*I’ll risk my life if it will help my friends, my family, and the children to escape.*

The rebels brandished their thicket of swords and spears at me from behind stone walls and greatshields. What an overblown response to a mere private tutor. And the knights of the guard were giving me awed looks as well. I hoped they realized that I was a paper tiger.

Richard returned, looking tired. “Did Lydia teach you that one, Allen?” he said. “I talked the youngsters into leaving.”

“Well done. I asked Sir Bertrand to build extra bulwarks for us,” I replied. “And wouldn’t most people call us ‘youngsters’ too?”

“You’ve got me there. Oh? I think it’s about time. Do you have a plan?”

The battle line ahead of us seethed with hostility. These foes were obviously of a different caliber than our previous opponents.

“Not a one,” I replied, shaking my head. “We’ll simply need to fight bravely until the evacuation is complete.”

“Now that’s what I call valor! It’s time to win glory, and that really gets my blood pumping!”

“Let’s make this a fight to remember.” In a whisper, I added, “If worse comes to worst, retreat. I’ll stay behind.”

The vice commander of the royal guard made no reply as he studied the rebel army. Then he whipped out a cigarette, lit it with a breathtakingly stylish gesture, breathed in a puff of smoke, and exhaled. A moment of silence followed. Once the flames had reduced his cigarette to ash, without a glance at me, Richard Leinster shouted, “I don’t think so! Not on your life! I won’t take that advice, and you can’t make me!”

"You're the future Duke Leinster," I reminded him. "You needn't risk your life in a place like this."

Richard had failed to master the symbols of his house—the supreme spell Firebird and the secret Scarlet Sword—but he could claim credit for whipping the royal guard back into shape. He ought to inherit the dukedom.

"Allen," he said, giving me an indignant look, "nowhere in the traditions of the House of Leinster does it say, 'Ditch your friends and win honors.' And in case you've forgotten, I'm deep in your debt."

"You are?"

Someone barked an order, and the enemy advance began. Richard drew his sword and began weaving spells as he replied, "You saved my knights' lives. And you saved my sister, Lydia, too. Everyone was just about ready to declare her a lost cause when you swept away her darkness and became her light. You saved my little sister's life! I owe you for that, and I was raised to pay my debts. Knights of the royal guard, it's time for battle! We're about to become living shields to buy the weak time to escape! If that's not knightly, I don't know what is. Remember why you joined up!"

"Yes, sir!" the knights roared, inspired, as they readied swords, lances, and greatshields.

His Highness certainly is a handful. And he called me "friend."

"I don't know what to do with you," I said, taking my place beside Richard. "Neither of us can afford to die here, then."

"I hear you loud and clear!" Richard roared, activating the advanced spell Scorching Sphere on the tip of his longsword.

The enemy line halted and bristled with staves as a series of flame-resistant barriers rose—and collapsed. Consternation sparked an uproar among the sorcerers in the enemy rear. I might not have stood a chance against a force of hundreds or thousands, but my magical interference was effective against a few dozen. The massive fireball gouged a hole in the enemy ranks, scattering their knights before it.

"Now!" Richard commanded. "Knights of the royal guard, charge!"

The knights bellowed in response as they all broke cover and surged toward the foe. We would win this engagement, but our enemies had us overwhelmingly outnumbered. Sooner or later, those numbers would take their toll. Nevertheless...

"I'll keep them safe," I murmured. "This is no place for me to die!"

With that, I broke into a run.

*

"Allen! Can you hear me?! Everyone in Old Town is across the bridge! Withdraw as soon as you can! If you need help, all the militia forces here will come to your rescue!"

The longed-for message reached my ears in the lull after we broke the fourth wave of the main rebel army. We had already retreated as far as our final barricades before the bridge, and frankly, we were all in rough shape. None of us had died—a miracle in itself—but some of the knights had suffered heavy injuries or exhausted their mana supply. Every last one of them had screamed that they could still fight when we forced them to retreat to the plaza. The royal guard beggared belief.

"Rolo, I've been waiting to hear from you," I replied into my communication orb while I wrapped bandages around my right arm and then my left. "What about New Town?"

"We're not done there yet, although I think just about everyone's across," he said.

"Understood. We don't need reinforcements, so focus on fortifying the plaza. You know as well as I do how unassailable its construction is. Once we fall back, destroy the western connecting bridge, even if the chieftains don't order it."

"All right. I'll be waiting."

The communication ended, and I turned to the red-haired vice commander of the royal guard, whose white armor was stained with his own blood.

"Richard, the evacuation of the Old Town beastfolk is complete. Let's withdraw."

Heavily, he replied, "Sorry, Allen, but it looks like that's not in the cards."

"What do you— Oh, I see."

Two banners fluttered behind the rebel line. One belonged to the Ducal House of Algren, one of the kingdom's Four Great Dukedoms. So, they had finally sent their very best forces. But the problem was the insignia on the other banner beside it—a small goblet and dagger wrapped in chains and surrounded by crosses on four sides.

Bertrand, his forehead swathed in bandages, stood beside Richard and groaned. "Wh-What...What are the eastern Knights of the Holy Spirit doing here?"

"The Algrens invited them," I spat. "They've sold out the kingdom!"

The mighty knights of the royal guard stood stunned.

The Four Great Dukedoms had guarded the kingdom from countless perils since its founding. The sky falling seemed more plausible than one of them welcoming a foreign army into its borders. Yet they had. The knights' shock was understandable, but this whole sequence of events finally made sense.

The Ducal House of Algren's reluctance throughout Gerard's insurrection.

Gerard's possession of a rough approximation of Resurrection as well as Radiant Shield, to say nothing of Blazing Qilin.

Lord Grant's obedient consent to answer for himself before the royal family and the other three ducal houses.

The unusual activity concerning matériel that Felicia had mentioned in her letters.

The major military exercises that the empire was conducting along our borders in the north, and the League of Principalities in the south.

The inquisitors from the Church of the Holy Spirit who had identified me as "the Brain of the Lady of the Sword" and attacked me.

The rebel army's unflinching, merciless attacks on unprotected beastfolk.

Gil's failure to visit me in the hospital fit right into place. What a fool I had been.

"Richard," I said.

"Allen, I still take pride in my house, even if you wouldn't always guess it," the red-haired knight replied, breathing deeply and gripping his longsword. "You can't imagine how many times my father and grandfather told me that 'the ducal houses have a duty to defend the kingdom'! And yet, they...they...!" Blood oozed from his hand as it tightened on his sword hilt. Lord Richard Leinster was truly worthy to inherit a dukedom.

The enemy ranks parted with practiced precision, and an imposing, gray-haired man advanced. Despite his obviously advanced age, his steps were firm. He gripped a single-bladed spear in his right hand and wore the heavy armor of a knight. Once he reached the middle of the square, he roared, “I am Haig Hayden, vassal to Duke Algren! I wish to speak with your commander!”

I exchanged glances with Richard, then hollered, “I hate to disappoint a grand knight, but we must decline! You gentlemen are traitors and cowards who made a point to turn your swords against defenseless beastfolk on the morning after the Spirit Sending. We have nothing to say to such miserable excuses for knighthood!”

The knights in the enemy’s rear line rattled their weapons. All carried identical, long, single-bladed spears and massive shields bearing the Algren arms. These were the personal guards of the Ducal House of Algren, spoken of in the same breath as the Violet Order.

The grizzled knight narrowed his eyes. “You claim that our forces assaulted the citizenry, young sorcerer?”

“I won’t let you feign ignorance,” I replied. “Algren vassals and soldiers unleashed their swords, spears, and spells on undefended people!”

A long pause followed. “I...I know nothing of this!” The knight sounded as though he forced the bitter words from his lungs only with great effort.

Could he be speaking the truth?

Before he recovered from his shock, another knight emerged from the gap in the line. The new arrival’s boxy helmet hid his face, and his heavy breastplate was emblazoned with a small goblet and dagger wrapped in chains. A knight of the Holy Spirit. The massive greatsword in his right hand rested on his shoulder.

“Sir Hayden, there’s no sense in bandying words with them,” he sneered. “Our mission is to take the Great Tree.”

“Sir Gaucher,” the old knight replied stiffly, “I’ll thank you to hold your tongue.”

“What difference does a dead animal or two make? Hundreds or thousands will soon be—”

I was out of patience. My fury boiled over as I darted out of cover and cast the strongest magic that I could muster. The elementary spell Divine Earth Mire turned the ground to clinging mud under Sir Gaucher’s feet. Once he was immobilized, I fired the intermediate spells Divine Fire Spear and Divine Ice Spear into the gaps in his armor while conjuring a spearhead of lightning on the tip of my staff. Then, I closed in and leapt, twirling as I brought my staff down in sync with the projectiles—only for the knight of the Holy Spirit to block it with his left hand. He had dispelled my intermediate magic without even looking.

“Mock beaaast!”

I narrowly escaped being slammed into our barricade by cushioning myself with a levitation spell. The man’s armor was intensely resistant to magic; no spell at my disposal could pierce it.

I got to my feet, readied my staff, and coldly told the grizzled knight, “You’ve turned your blades on the people you’re sworn to protect. It’s too late for excuses!”

My words hung in the air for a moment before he said, “I must confirm something. Sir Gaucher, withdraw for the present.”

“I refuse!” the knight of the Holy Spirit snapped. “My mission is to seize the Great Tree! The Holy Spirit and the Saint desire it!”

“Confirmation comes first!”

The two knights glared at each other.

The Saint again? I made a mental note while I racked my brain for a solution. The lone knight of the Holy Spirit before us would be one thing, but the royal guard couldn’t afford a clash with his whole order at present. They would overwhelm us with numbers.

I really am incorrigible.

While I was busy berating myself for my folly, the vice commander stepped out of cover.

“R-Richard, what are you thinking?!” I cried, flustered.

“Oh, nothing much,” he said. “I’m just feeling light as a feather. Maybe that rare glimpse of you losing your temper had something to do with it. Anyway, I think I’m up for one more good tussle. This’ll make a great story to tell Lydia, Lynne, mother, and Anna.” He then shifted his attention to our quarreling enemies. “This is a battlefield! If you want to talk, do it with swords!”

The elderly knight grunted, while the knight of the Holy Spirit gave a derisive sniff and said, “Well spoken, for an infidel. I, Gore Gaucher, commander of the Fourth Order of the Knights of the Holy Spirit, shall be your opponent.” He turned to his knights and barked, “Do not interfere!”

“Yes, sir,” they responded in unison. They were frightfully disciplined, which would make them difficult to handle.

"By all means, leave the field," Gaucher said to the grizzled knight. "We shall scatter this rabble and seize the Great Tree."

"I doubt you can," Hayden replied.

The knight of the Holy Spirit snorted and rested his greatsword on his shoulder, looking sour.

For an instant, my eyes met those of the departing Hayden. Was that an overpowering sense of regret in his gaze?

Gaucher waited to see the grizzled knight and his Algren guards begin to withdraw, then abruptly swung his greatsword at the earth. A cloud of dust rose as he taunted us, shouting, "Now, infidel and mock beast, face me if you dare!"

"Dear me," I said.

"He can certainly move," Richard remarked.

Without stopping to confer, we plunged into the dust cloud from opposite sides. I bound the enemy knight's left arm with Divine Darkness Threads and cast Divine Ice Thorns at his feet.

"P-Poltroon!" Gaucher bellowed.

Interference from his armor made short work of both spells, but the momentary restraints still left him wide open. I ensconced the tip of my staff in flame and unleashed a rapid series of thrusts, targeting gaps in his armor and working my way down from shoulder to hip. The knight groaned. Success!

Richard's blade flashed in from the right, showcasing his exceptional swordplay. Like me, he aimed at gaps in Gaucher's armor, but his strikes bit far deeper. How like a Leinster!

"Chew on this!" the vice commander shouted, conjuring a Scorching Sphere on his sword point. Gaucher grunted sharply and fell back, taking the brunt of the point-blank fireball on his greatsword. The insignia on his armor glowed.

So, that's the source of his magical defenses. That's one mystery solved. The other question is, why don't Gaucher's wounds seem to slow him down?

"Richard, did you feel your blows strike home?" I asked the red-haired knight, who stood beside me with his sword at the ready.

"All clean hits," he replied. "He shouldn't be able to stand after that."

With a shout of exertion and a crushing sound, the massive fireball vanished. "A surprise attack is a coward's tactic!" the knight of the Holy Spirit shouted, thrusting his greatsword at us. "Have you no shame?!"

“You’re carrying out a surprise attack of your own as we speak,” I reminded him.

“So your insults don’t carry much weight,” Richard agreed.

Gaucher harrumphed. “Ours is a holy war. One you infidels could never comprehend!”

He raised his greatsword in both hands, then flew forward like a bolt from a ballista. Were those chains sprouting from his feet?! Richard and I threw up magical barriers for all we were worth, while the royal guard launched offensive spells.

Gaucher roared with laughter. “That won’t save youuu!”

Interference weakened our barriers and deflected the barrage of spells. It would seriously drain my mana, but ice spells from the ground might—

“Mock beaaast!” the knight of the Holy Spirit roared triumphantly. “For the Holy Spirit and the Saint, I will now—”

“Who are you calling a ‘mock beast’? Don’t you dare insult my brother!”

A flash of light shot between us, followed by a peal of thunder. Dust billowed as nearby streetlights shattered from the shock. The advanced spell Imperial Lightning Dance tore through the sky to smite Gaucher from high above. He had shrugged off Richard’s and my attacks, but this bolt smashed him to the ground. His chains were vanishing, shredded by a sudden gust. Richard and I fell back almost to our barricades.

“Thank you, Caren,” I said without turning around. “Still, I wish you hadn’t come.”

“Splendid work!” the vice commander added. “Ever considered a career in the royal guard?”

“Not interested,” my sister replied. She was supposed to have evacuated to the Great Tree, but here she was, swooping in to save us just in the nick of time. “Allen,” she said icily, closing the distance between us in the blink of an eye. Her ears and tail were bristling. “You bit off more than you can chew, didn’t you? All on your own!”

“Oh, well...” I fumbled for a response. “Y-You know how it is. I really tried, but—”

“That’s not the point! Jeez!”

I felt my pain recede as Caren bombarded me with healing spells.

“Wow,” Richard exclaimed as she showered more curative magic on him and his knights. "Now I *definitely* want you for the guard!"

Battle-hardened knights heaped more praises on her.

"She can cast intermediate healing spells on this many people?"

"I guess the genius's sister is brilliant in her own right."

"I can hardly believe it."

I'm glad to see my sister appreciated. But even so...

"I...I'm all right now," I said. "My wounds are all—"

"Stay put," Caren snapped, evidently furious. There was no reasoning with her, so I let her have her way and—

"Caren!" I cried, sensing baleful mana. She let out a yelp as I tackled her and knocked Richard and his knights to the ground with a wind spell.

A beam of gray light shot through the space where our heads had just been. The blast tore through every wooden structure in its path, leaving only ashes.

It had come from Gaucher. The knight's armor was charred and his helmet missing, revealing the face beneath—shorn-off lips, a crushed nose, and what looked like burn scars where his hair should have been. Caren's lightning spell hadn't caused these injuries. And the left half of his face was covered in a gray spell formula, which writhed as though with a life of its own.

"Just like Gerard," I said. "Has the Church of the Holy Spirit already reconstructed the great spell Resurrection?!"

Gaucher's intact right eye focused on me, while mana gathered in his cloudy left one.

"Richard!" I shouted.

"Leave it to me!" The dependable vice commander conjured a four-layered barrier of fire right in front of Gaucher.

I rose to my feet and cast my experimental two-element anti-detection spell, Pale-Azure Snowflakes, with all the force I could muster. That would stop anyone tracking our mana. I then reflected on my confrontation with Gerard as I racked my brain for countermeasures.

Gaucher doesn't have Radiant Shield or Blazing Qilin, but Lydia and Tina aren't with me this time. Against the great spell Resurrection, Richard and I won't be—

"Caren?" I asked, startled by her grip on my collar.

My sister stared intently at me, then lowered her head. I was just about to address her again when many more beams of light fired skyward. Several grazed branches of the Great Tree, pulverizing them and filling the air with falling leaves.

So, it has that much power even at long range.

Richard and I shared a look and then nodded to each other.

“Abandon this position!” the vice commander bellowed to his knights. “Take Caren and retreat to the plaza! Allen and I will put an end to that freak. If our mana disappears, then Bertrand takes command! You can trust Rolo—coordinate with him!”

“Richard!” the veteran knight cried, although he had kept his cool throughout the fierce battle.

“As your superior officer, this is the least I can do,” said the scion of the Ducal House of Leinster. “You’re not going to make me say, ‘That’s an order,’ are you?”

Bertrand bit back a protest and barked, “Retreat! On the double!” The knights began to withdraw.

I winked at my older friend, then turned back to my sister. “Caren, this is a once-in-a-lifetime request. Please go.”

“No,” she said slowly.

“Caren.”

“No!”

I crouched down to look her in the eye. But without warning, her right hand seized my collar again and yanked me toward her. She was extremely close, and there were large tears in her eyes.

“When...When are you going to look at me?” she demanded.

“I’m always keeping an eye on—”

“You are not!” she vehemently interrupted. “You still see me as a little girl! But I’ve...I’ve gotten stronger! I’m not just someone who needs your help anymore! Look at me. Look at who I am now. Let me stand beside you.” Tears ran down her cheeks.

“Caren...”

Some brother I am.

“Correction,” the vice commander called to his retreating knights. “Allen, *Caren*, and I will bring him down!”

“Richard?!” I exclaimed.

“You’re not winning this one, Allen. And experience has taught me it’s best to admit defeat quickly.”

“But—”

With a shock, the four-layered fire barrier tore, and my snowflakes scattered.

“Infideeels!” Gaucher howled, hefting his greatsword. Unlike

Gerard, he seemed to still be conscious at this stage. Was their research into Resurrection progressing?

Richard took a step forward and grinned. “I’ll hold him off. Talk things out quickly!” Then, with a horizontal sweep of his longsword, he cast multiple instances of the advanced spell Crimson Fire Lances. A stream of bright, fiery spears bore down on the knight of the Holy Spirit, who had by this time relinquished a good deal of his humanity.

“Child’s playyy!” Gaucher intercepted or resisted the bombardment using his greatsword and gray light. Dreadful crashes and gusts of scorching air followed as the wooden square caught fire in the blink of an eye.

I looked down at my sister, whom I held in my arms. “Caren.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m being selfish. But you’re *my* brother, not Lydia’s or Tina’s or Stella’s! So...So...!”

Before me, Gaucher was advancing step by step through Richard’s barrage.

I hugged Caren. “I would never have been able to push myself this hard if not for you.”

“Really?” she asked hesitantly.

“Really. I’ve always thought that I needed to protect you. But from now on, let’s move forward together.” I paused. “That lightning spell was incredible.”

“Huh? A-Allen?”

I let go of Caren, gave my staff a twirl, and held out my left hand. “I think it’s high time we took care of him. Will you help me?”

Her ears perked up and her tail wagged with delight as she seized my hand in both of hers. “Y-Yes! Yes, definitely!”

I faintly linked our mana. Caren released my hand and entered Lightning Apotheosis, then tossed her dagger and formed a spear of lightning with a cross-shaped head. We exchanged nods.

Richard stopped casting spells and fell back to join us. “Did you work it out?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I have no complaints!” Caren added before the word was even out of my mouth.

“All right, then; I’m passing the baton. It looks like I haven’t got the firepower to finish him off,” the vice commander said with a hint of vexation.

“Infideeels!” Gaucher bellowed, shaking free of the flames and brandishing his greatsword. “The Holy Spirit and the Saint desire the Great Tree! Do as I say and relinquish it t-to...to usSs!” Partway through this demand, his speech began to falter, and his greatsword slipped from his grasp to land point-down in the ground. Gray radiance burst from his heart, shattering his armor and warping his body into some form of grotesque quadruped.

The Church or the Knights of the Holy Spirit had succeeded in mass-producing crude replicas of Resurrection. But their work, it seemed, was far from perfect and extracted a price from its user. Even under these circumstances, the line of knights remained motionless. In fact...

“They’re using video orbs?” I murmured.

Gray-robed sorcerers under the knights’ protection were recording the thing that Gaucher had become, as if observing an experiment. I felt a chill. With a sweep of my staff, I cast Divine Light Arrows to snipe the orbs out of the sorcerers’ hands, destroying them. I also raised a massive wall of ice between Gaucher and his comrades and reactivated Pale-Azure Snowflakes. They would have a difficult time breaking through defenses this thick.

The thing that had been Gaucher roared, then shrieked, “For the HoLY SpiRiT and the SaIIInT!” His gray light was clouding over into pitch blackness. I sensed a deep, dark pulse.

Caren was preparing three Imperial Lightning Dances on her spearhead—but would ordinary advanced magic have any effect on a great spell? In my two previous battles, Lydia’s and Tina’s overwhelming mana had lent their supreme spells and secret arts the force to transcend the healing power of Radiant Shield and Resurrection. I only had Caren with me this time, and while her mana far outstripped that of the average person, it didn’t measure up to those two. To make matters worse, the Knights of the Holy Spirit were close at hand. We couldn’t afford to prolong the battle and wait for Gaucher to wear himself out.

We’ll need to end this in a single blow, then.

Caren looked at me, her cheeks flushed and her ears and tail stiff with nervous tension.

“Allen, a d-deeper mana link ought to resolve all our difficulties,” she said. “So, in concrete terms...h-here!”

Caren planted a kiss on my forehead. Her lightning intensified as our mana became more deeply intertwined.

“Wow,” Richard said, smirking. I glared at him as I struck the butt of my staff on the ground.

The experimental advanced spell Eight Icicle Talons mercilessly ran Gaucher through from above and below, pinning him in place. Perhaps the knight of the Holy Spirit no longer even felt pain, because he didn’t utter so much as a cry as he produced numerous dark-gray chains from his body to form a hand, with which he began struggling to wrench the icicles free.

“I don’t recall raising you to behave like this,” I told Caren.

“Sisters protect their brothers,” she said. “That’s the way of the world and my pact with the Great Tree. Let’s go!”

Caren readied her lightning spear and sped off in a dazzlingly quick charge. I cast the experimental two-element advanced spell Iced Lightning Sprint on my feet and accompanied her.

The thing that had been Gaucher was still trapped in my icicles, but mana was gathering in his left eye. “Animals must DiEEE!” he screamed as a sinister ray of dark-gray light fired at Caren.

Not on my watch!

I cast a series of Divine Ice Mirrors, diverting the beam and deflecting it back at Gaucher. He immediately fired a second blast, which canceled out the reflected strike. The shock wave demolished nearby buildings, and many more hands of dark-gray chains struck at us out of the swirling dust.

I incinerated them all with another experimental advanced spell, Scarlet Burning Field. At the same time, I cast the experimental two-element support spell Heavenly Wind Bound on Caren and myself and leapt. Another ice mirror provided a foothold in midair—right over Gaucher’s head.

Only one thing left to do.

“Caren.”

“I understand!” she responded immediately.

We both gripped her spear, exchanged the briefest of glances, and then kicked off the mirror into a sharp descent.

“Become fodder! Fooor! Myyy! FAIIITH!” shrieked the writhing, grotesque remains of Gaucher, giving full vent to his hatred. Mana concentrated in his eye, but then scarlet flames engulfed him—one of Richard’s fire spears! Perfectly timed!

Even so, Gaucher produced countless dark-gray chains from his body to intercept our aerial strike.

Caren howled, “Right here, right now, I’m going to prove *I’m* the one who’s invincible with Allen at my side!”

The three Imperial Lightning Dances she’d kept ready on her spearhead blasted away the mass of sinister chains and cleared our path. Gaucher’s back was in sight!

I held my staff alongside Caren’s lightning spear and imbued it with the advanced spells I had been devising for her, Tina, and Ellie. Thunder Fang Spear, Eight Icicle Talons, and Scattering Gale Moon—a compound of lightning, ice, and wind. Each new element increased the spell’s power by an order of magnitude. Caren had already gone this far in her duel with Stella, but the strain was still tremendous. Any more would be—

Caren dug her nails into my hand and shot me a look that said, “Keep going.”

I closed my eyes for the briefest of moments, then continued adding my experimental magic. Scarlet Burning Field. Ruinous Water Blossom. Piercing Earth Hammer. Momentary Flash Ray. Tenebrous Shadow Axe. Advanced spells of all eight elements combined into a whorl of rainbow brilliance. Caren and I struggled to control the straining lightning spear. Its force now clearly exceeded that of a secret art or supreme spell!

My whole body was in agony, but the emotions flowing into me from Caren were nothing but pure joy. Despite our desperate situation, I could barely suppress a smile.

“The Saint chose meEe!” Gaucher roared, unleashing another wave of dark-gray chains from his back. “My faith cannot fall nOOOw!”

The chains coalesced into a single lance and collided with our shining spear. Spiraling rainbow and baleful darkness vied for supremacy. Caren’s eyes turned an even deeper and richer shade of violet, and her crackling sparks turned to flashes of lightning.

Together, we shouted, “Take thiiis!”

For an instant, the point of our rainbow spear became a howling lightning wolf, and the balance collapsed. Our desperate strike annihilated the dark-gray lance and plunged into the grotesque creature’s back, where we unleashed our mana.

The next instant, I felt a massive shock. I saw the dagger that had served as our medium shatter under the strain and the ice wall collapse as fissures ran through the square. I clung to Caren as we were blown back and raised the strongest magical defenses I could manage. We landed in the wreckage of our barricades.

"Unbelievable," I muttered as the dust settled.

"Even for a freak, this is ridiculous!" Richard groaned.

We both shuddered.

Gaucher still stood there, back in human form and glaring at us. His mouth moved. "Saint... Holy Spirit..." was as far as he got before his eyes sunk in, his teeth fell out, and his flesh shriveled, leaving him nothing but skin and bones as he fell.

Did we...win?

The Knights of the Holy Spirit remained utterly silent despite their commander's defeat. Several hulking knights emerged from their ranks but made no move to attack. They recovered Gaucher's body, and then withdrew in perfect order. Meanwhile, I could just barely make out the gray-robed figures discussing something among themselves.

"What are they saying?" I murmured. "'Partial success in the blood experiment,' 'key,' 'defective,' 'final'..."

"Allen?" Richard said.

"Nothing. We should retreat too. We need to demolish that bridge."

"I suppose. And, by the way...Caren will suffocate if you don't let go of her."

"What?" I looked down at myself. Caren was still clasped in my arms, stiff as a board and blushing furiously. I hurriedly released her and severed our mana link.

"I f-forbid you to h-hug me that tight without warning!" she snapped, puckering her lips.

"I...I don't see what else I could have done in that situation," I said. "But I'll take care to avoid it from now on."

"No, you will not."

"U-Um..."

"No. You. Will. Not." Caren advanced on me, looking deadly serious and radiating extraordinary intensity. I nodded in spite of myself, eliciting a burst of laughter from Richard.

Grrr...

"Allen!" came a loud cry from the direction of the bridge. I turned to see Rolo, the militia, and even the knights of the royal guard who were supposed to have retreated waving to us. Richard and I looked at each other and then broke into rueful grins.

The vice commander strode off toward his knights, shouting, “You’re all disobeying orders!”

What a good officer he is. Now, we’d better move along and—

Caren nestled her head against my left shoulder. “Allen,” she said, “I helped...didn’t I?”

“Of course you did. Richard and I couldn’t have won without you. Thank you. I suppose I can’t go on treating you like a child.”

My sister twitched. “In that case,” she whispered, “I think I’ll grow out my hair again.”

I stared fixedly at her face in profile. There was maturity there.

“I understand that I’m not qualified to walk beside you now, but I won’t lose!” She touched the scarlet and azure ribbons on my staff, then seized me by the collar and brought her face close to mine. “After all, I was the first to get you to do my hair and the first to tie my ribbon on your staff! Not Lydia, not Tina, not Stella—me! Please never forget that. And when my hair grows out again...you’ll still be the only one I let style it for me.”

She let go and set off for the connecting bridge without even waiting for my answer.

After a moment, I murmured, “Oh dear. That made my heart race.”

While I agonized over having entertained such feelings for my sister, I conjured a little bird. Things had worked out here, but what about New Town?

*

“Do you realize what you’re saying?!” Richard roared at the assembled chieftains, who sat around a circular table in their council chamber in the upper reaches of the Great Tree. The face of my usually mild-mannered friend was a mask of rage, and blood was oozing through the bandages on his forehead. “You can’t demolish the eastern bridge because a group of New Town residents hasn’t managed to evacuate yet—I’ll grant you that—but you already know those people and the militia defending them are surrounded. We can’t afford to drag our feet with this decision!”

Having survived Gaucher’s onslaught, we had fallen back to the plaza and demolished the western bridge. In the meantime, my birds had scouted New Town and discovered a group of the fox clan who, for some reason, had holed up on an inland hill rather than evacuating to the Great Tree. Enemy forces hemmed them in on all sides. Richard and I had left command of the plaza to Rolo and raced to the council of chieftains with our report. However...

“Yet what do you say?” The red-haired knight banged his fists on the table. “‘We will now debate whether to dispatch militia forces to aid the stranded citizens. We won’t stop the knights of the royal guard or any refugees of other races from attempting their own rescue.’ Are you mad?”

The chieftains of Old Town kept silent, anguish and fatigue plain on their faces. The New Town chieftains broke out in a chorus of reproof.

“What?!”

“Y-You may be Duke Leinster’s son...”

“...B-But we won’t take this lying down!”

“That’s right.”

“How dare humans barge into the Great Tree?!”

“Who gave you leave?”

“Don’t make this fighting any worse.”

Only the female chieftain of the fox clan remained unmoved, her face downcast.

“Richard,” I said quietly, “I suspect we’re wasting our time.”

After a moment, the vice commander replied, “I guess so.”

We turned our backs on the chieftains and set off for the exit.

“Allen, wait! What are you going to do?!” Ogi called. As chieftain of the wolf clan and head of the council, he sat in the center of the group.

“I’m going to rescue the people in New Town,” I levelly replied, stopping but not turning around. “Most of the stragglers are women and children, and there are Knights of the Holy Spirit among the forces besieging them. If we don’t hurry...it will be too late.”

“B-But...” Ogi faltered.

The shaken New Town chieftains shouted to stop me.

“W-Wait.”

“Th-The likes of you has no say in this matter.”

“I...I’m certain we still have room to negotiate.”

“Remember the Old Pledge.”

“Besides, you’re human!”

“Yes, human!”

“Leave us.”

“Listen,” Richard interrupted, “don’t you think you’ve said enough?" The New Town chieftains stopped their insults in shock as the flames of his wrath singed my skin.

Exhausted, Ogi pleaded, "Allen, can't you give us just a little more time?"

"You've had more than enough time to deliberate," I replied icily with a shake of my head. "You must realize that the Old Pledge with the Algrens is a dead letter."

I swept my gaze over the table. In the face of this unprecedented Algren rebellion, the council seemed to have given up on thinking for itself, driven by the distrust of humans that had been smoldering since Atra's death.

Sorry, Lydia. I'm about to throw caution to the wind.

"You've already decided that you can't make up your minds. So, I'll do as I see fit, especially as you evidently don't consider me beastfolk." I gave an exaggerated shrug of my shoulders and chuckled. "I suppose I really am a 'mock beast.'"

That shook the Old Town chieftains.

"Allen!" Ogi cried, rising to his feet as the blood drained from his face.

I bowed deeply. "Thank you very much for all you've done for me. This is goodbye. Richard, let's be going."

Epilogue

I stopped in my tracks as soon as I left the Great Tree.

"Allen?" asked the red-haired nobleman. "What's wrong?"

"I'm...a bit tired," I replied. "Would you see to the fortifications and explain things to the knights and militia for me?"

Richard clapped me on the shoulder and walked off.

He must have realized that I wanted to take in this scenery one last time. How considerate of him.

I sat down, still holding my staff, and began removing the bandages from both my arms—I didn't want my mom to see them. Numerous beastfolk and a scattering of dwarves, elves, and humans passed to and fro around me. The gravely wounded had been moved inside the Great Tree, it appeared, so everyone out here was in relatively good health. A number of simple tents had already gone up, and people were helping each other regardless of race or clan. There was none of the antagonism between Old and New Town or the antihuman sentiment that I had felt in the council chamber.

If only the chieftains would step outside and see this.

Just then, one of the young fox-clan girls I'd met in New Town the other day ran up to me. Tears welled in her big eyes.

"Hm?" I said. "Where's your big sister?"

She clung to me without a word, so I patted her on the back. She was shaking.

"Ine!" a flustered fox-clan woman cried, racing toward us from the direction of the bridge. Bloody bandages swathed her cheeks and right arm.

"Your mother's here for you," I told the girl. But she wouldn't let go.

"Listen," she said, looking me in the eye. Her voice was hoarse with weeping. "Listen. My big sis is still...on the other side of the bridge."

My eyes widened. "She is? I understand. But don't worry; everything is going to be all right. I'll go fetch her. I promise."

"Really?" The girl paused. "Okay!" She beamed and returned to her mother, who tearfully embraced her.

I gripped my staff, stood up, and then spotted my parents huddling together amid the crowd. I wanted to run to them, but I restrained myself and started walking toward the Great Bridge. On my way, I met many people. A female cat-clan healer and a dog-clan sorcerer had remained outside the Great Tree to help people in the absence of official orders. A young human woman with streaks of gray in her hair was assisting them. An elderly squirrel-clan woman and an elven man were giving out hot soup that they were brewing in a cauldron. Members of the ox clan and dwarves were carrying spare chairs and tables from the Great Tree out into the plaza. Griffin riders who had arrived from the royal capital the night before had been swept up in the commotion, although I thanked my lucky stars that the mail they carried included a letter from Felicia and the item that I'd asked her to procure. I even got to exchange a few words with Deg, the former deputy chieftain of the otter clan. "We ask too much of you," he said in parting as he entered the Great Tree to report on evacuation efforts.

People, it seemed, were taking matters into their own hands and keeping chaos to a minimum.

When I at last caught sight of the Great Bridge, I spotted a familiar face amid the fleeing crowd. "Toneri," I said, patting him on the shoulder from behind.

"Wh-What?! O-Oh, it's just you." Chieftain Ogi's son clicked his tongue. His entourage of other boys was with him. None of them seemed hurt, and their clothes were clean, but for some reason, they seemed terribly rattled—no, frightened.

I was just about to question them when three signal flares burst in the eastern sky. Their vivid hues were red, red, red.

A second volley took flight—red, red, red.

The adult beastfolk nearby began to clamor.

"L-Look!"

"Oh, I know those colors."

"The fools!"

"We must tell the chiefs!"

One after another, they ran off at full tilt toward the Great Tree. But the chiefs wouldn't be able to make up their minds immediately, and while they deliberated, the stragglers were in mortal peril. My plans hadn't changed. To the Great Bridge.

"H-Hey!" Toneri shouted, his tone a mix of fear and irritation. "Wh-Where do you think you're going?!"

"Hm? Isn't it obvious? I'm going to rescue those people in New Town."

The adults stared at me, wide-eyed and shaken. Toneri and his flunkies were stunned.

"D-Don't you...don't you know what those colors m-mean?!" the wolf-clan boy stammered.

"Three red flares mean 'Ambush. Stay away. Abandon us.' I know that. But what of it? Beastfolk don't turn their backs on family, and I *am* beastfolk, even if I don't have beast ears or a tail. It's my time to serve." After a brief pause, I added, "I don't care if I'm not accepted."

I strode forward, leaving the speechless Toneri behind. If Richard opposed the operation, I would set out alone to—

Someone stood before the Great Bridge, her arms spread to bar my path. Despite her small stature, she loomed larger than anyone else there in my eyes.

"I won't let you go! I won't! Not this time!"

"Mom..."

I had never seen such anguish on my mother Ellyn's face. She must have run frantically to get ahead of me. One of her feet was unshod, and blood oozed through her sock.

"Allen," she said, approaching me with tears in her eyes, "you're my—and Nathan's—only son in the whole wide world. No one can take your place in my—in *our* hearts. Do you understand what that means?"

Her words stung me. What an unworthy son I was. Not only had I stayed away from the eastern capital after failing my court sorcerer exam, I had made my mom weep twice in the span of this summer vacation. But even so...

"I'll be fine," I said, smiling. "It won't be too dangerous—just a quick trip there and back."

But even my best wasn't good enough to fool my mom. She clung to me and hammered on my chest. "Liar! Liar! Liar! Don't try to do everything yourself! You're still seventeen! Still only a child! I—we—didn't send you to the royal capital because we wanted you to...to do something like this!"

"Mom." I clasped her hands—so small, yet warmer than anyone else's—in both of mine. "Thank you. Thank you so much. Just hearing that from you is...is enough for me."

"Allen?" My mom stared at me with teary eyes. In the old days, I had done nothing but cry. She and dad had protected me back then.

"I've always felt proud to be your and dad's son from the very bottom of my heart," I continued, smiling. "Being your son is what kept me going all this way. And that's why"—I steadied my nerves as I shared my resolve with the mother I loved and respected—"I'm going to save children, friends, and family. You and dad taught me to never abandon what matters most to me."

"Allen... No! No!" Great tears streamed down her cheeks. "No!"

We weren't related by blood—I wasn't even beastfolk—yet she still loved me with all her heart. My pent-up emotions burst forth in a flood of tears.

"When I was little," I sobbed, "and I got bullied to tears almost every day, you were always there to hug me, and dad always gave me a pat on the head. Your warmth and his kindness kept me alive to this day. You...You can't imagine how much courage it gave me! I never forgot. Back then, I always prayed to the Great Tree to let me be your son in my next life too. And my feelings haven't changed."

"Then, don't leave us!" my mom pressed, her eyes red from crying. "Please... Please don't go..."

Behind me, I sensed familiar, gentle mana.

I'm the luckiest person in the world.

"I was fortunate to be your son," I said. "Truly, truly fortunate. The two of you were the first light that showed me my path and gave me the courage to walk it. And that light never went out. But now it's my turn to light the way. Thank you. I love you, mom."

"Allen!" With that strangled cry, she crumpled to the ground and began to sob with her face in her hands.

I let out a breath, turned, and called, "See you later, dad!"

"Allen..." said my father, Nathan. He had forced himself to come, although his leg must still have pained him, and he was covered in sweat.

"Don't worry. Remember, I *have* made a name for myself as the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, even if I don't really deserve the honor."

He didn't reply immediately, but when he did, his subdued tone was in sharp contrast with my attempt at flippancy. "I don't have the strength to race across battlefields like my ancestors did, but I have read many books, and history speaks clearly. It says, ‘Never send your son to war’!”

“Dad, I’m certain now.” I tightened my right hand around Lydia’s staff and wiped my tears on my left sleeve. Then, because there was a chance of this being our last meeting, I smiled. “I must have become your son so that I could be here today. I’ll do my duty. I swear it on this name you gave me.”

“Allen!”

I’d never heard my dad shout before. My mom’s sobs grew louder, but I didn’t stop. I began to cross the Great Bridge.

Makeshift bulwarks of tables, chairs, and lumber crossed the middle of the plaza. The knights of the royal guard manned the front line, while militia and volunteer forces stood ready at the rear barricades.

Rebel standards already thronged the intact bridge to New Town. Their arms proclaimed them Algren regulars, and their force was somewhere in the vicinity of two thousand strong. The bridge limited the width of their vanguard, but they still had us at an extreme disadvantage. How long could we hold out?

"Allen!" Caren shouted, waving as soon as she spotted me. She had been speaking with Richard inside the fallback barricades.

As I approached, the nearby knights saluted me one by one.

"Richard, what's this about?" I asked, bewildered, while Caren proudly took up a place at my side.

"How could they not salute our commander in chief? Oh, I'd better join in. Mr. Allen, we await your orders!" Richard raised both hands in an exaggerated gesture. The nearby knights snickered.

"Are you trying to upset me?"

"Just a bit of fun. And you *are* our commander in chief. Isn't that right, Rolo?!"

"Hm? You bet it is!" The militia captain nodded from a short distance away. Several of the subordinates to whom he had been issuing orders—including Toma of the bearlet clan and Shima of the hare clan—gave me thumbs-ups. I didn't spot Sui among them.

"Did you see the signal flares?" I asked Richard.

"Yup, and Caren told me what they mean," he replied. "What's the plan, Allen?"

The whole vicinity went quiet as the knights, militia, and volunteers awaited my response. Apparently, they all understood the flares as well.

"We're mounting a rescue," I announced. "But only a small group of knights and I will participate."

For a moment, silence reigned over the encampment. Then, one knight after another began inspecting their equipment. The militia crowded toward me with Toma in the lead, looking furious. Rolo gritted his teeth.

"Allen!" Toma shouted with unfeigned anger. "What's the big idea, leaving us out?!"

"The chieftains haven't given me permission to deploy the militia," I replied.

"What?! Th-Then, what about you?! You can't just run off on your own."

"I'm—"

"Don't worry," Caren interrupted. "I'll go with him."

I glared at her, but she ignored me and calmly said, "The council has paralyzed itself into inactivity just when it needs to act most, so I'm taking matters into my own hands. Allen and I can handle anything that comes our way!"

"R-Right," said Toma. "Then, in that case...Allen, take us with you too!"

"No, Toma," I responded. "Now is the time for unity! And Caren, you said too much."

I exchanged glances, and nods, with Rolo. The militia began returning to their posts, leaving me alone with my sister, who crossed her arms and sulked.

Now for it.

"Caren," I said.

"You admitted I was ready earlier!" she snapped sullenly. "I'm going with you!"

"No. This is a very different situation." I drew a breath. "We still had somewhere to fall back to then. But now, I have to advance. Retreat isn't an option. And in any case"—I pointed to the sheath on Caren's left leg—"your dagger shattered. You're unarmed."

"S-Someone in the militia will lend me a weapon!"

"Nothing they have can withstand Lightning Apotheosis," I replied, shaking my head. My sister was clever—she understood her situation. "I can't take you with me."

"No!" Caren shook violently, tears pricking in her eyes. "Never! I absolutely refuse to stay behind! Nothing—*nothing*—can frighten me when we're together! Even with just my spells, I can watch your back more than well enough to—"

"Caren." I gently embraced my sister. Touching her like this, I felt her depleted mana even more clearly. She acted full of vigor, but she was in no condition to fight. I had pushed her too hard.

"A-Allen?!" she cried, flustered. "Th-This is so sudden! It's...It's not even dark yet!"

"Thank you for everything," I whispered in her ear. "I'm happy

—truly happy—that I got to be your brother. Thank you for being my sister—for teaching me to love others. You mean more to me than anyone else in the world, Caren. I'm sorry. Look after mom and dad for me."

"What? Al—"

When Caren was completely off her guard, I linked mana with her, disabled her physical enhancement spells, and struck. Her school beret fell and the silver wing and staff that marked her as vice president of the student council lost its luster as I caught her limp body.

Call me a liar—I've earned it. Elder brothers protect their sisters.

I gently released Caren's viselike grip on my left sleeve, tenderly stroked her head, then withdrew my watch from my inner pocket and left it with her beret. I then shot a meaning glance at Shima, who had been watching the whole exchange from a distance. She nodded, repeatedly wiping her tears as she approached and scooped up Caren in her arms.

I reached into an inner pocket and produced the delivery from the royal capital—a dagger in a pale-violet sheath—then drew and inspected it. The jet-black blade was entirely dull but extraordinarily strong. This weapon, I was certain, could withstand the strain of compounding all eight elements. Felicia had outdone herself. I returned the dagger to its sheath, along which I then ran my fingers, using my paltry mana to construct a permanent formula that would aid in magical control. It would be of some help to Caren.

"Shima, give this to Caren when she wakes," I said, passing the dagger to the hare-clan woman.

"Allen, you planned to do this all along, didn't you? But what about your own safety?!" Shima wept openly. A skilled sorceress like her couldn't fail to notice that my mana was more than half depleted.

"I haven't the courage to take my adorable little sister off to war," I said, winking and forcing a smile. Then, I surveyed the militia members who had gathered nearby. "Well then, the rest is in your hands. Please don't lose hope. You needn't worry about me. I promise I'll rescue the people trapped in New Town."

But no one answered or looked away. Toma started blubbering when he realized the truth. "Allen," he sobbed, "just because you've got the same name doesn't...doesn't mean you...!"

In the battle that had brought the War of the Dark Lord to an end, the legendary wolf-clan warrior Shooting Star had forded the Blood River to safety, then unflinchingly returned to save his stranded comrades. He had rescued every last one—and given up his life in the process. Shooting Star was the true standard of heroism that I had aspired to as a child.

Yet I was but a private tutor. I could never emulate his feat. Nevertheless, someone needed to go, and that little girl was counting on me. So, I would struggle to the bitter end. This would hardly be my first brush with death, and I wasn't fond of breaking promises. Of course, I had survived all those previous perils with a scarlet-haired young woman at my side. She gave me an unshakable conviction that, together, we were unbeatable.

She'll be furious when she hears I gave away that pocket watch.

My sister was still weeping in her sleep. I stroked her head one last time, then began walking toward the battlefield.

The force of knights was already assembled at the foremost barricades. They worked fast.

"Richard," I called, taking up a position beside the red-haired nobleman, who was leisurely surveying the enemy army.

"I have a handpicked company of knights ready to go—forty-seven in all," Richard said. "No eldest children, no one with a spouse, child, or fiancée, and no one injured." Without changing his expression, he added, "Oh, and needless to say, I'll be joining you."

"I seem to recall you being an eldest child *and* having a fiancée," I responded with forced levity. "Who will oversee our forces here? You should remain and—"

"Allen, I'm still a Leinster, not a Sykes, and I have a responsibility as a member of a ducal house. The longest-serving knights will see to things here. And don't forget Rolo—he's the kind of person I want in the guard."

"He's an architect by trade," I said. "He's also an eldest child with a lovely wife and daughter."

"What a shame. And here I thought I'd found a new potential officer. But that's life, I suppose."

"I couldn't agree more."

We looked at each other and grinned. Ahead of us, the enemy ranks were stirring, evidently preparing to strike.

"Allen, you should stay! There's no denying that we're marching into nearly certain death," Richard said, his expression grim. "If I let you go now, I'll have a crying Lydia and Lynne to answer to." Even in these desperate straits, my kindhearted friend remained eminently sensible.

"Thank you very much," I replied. "I'm not Allen the Shooting Star, who gave his life to save the human world in the War of the Dark Lord. I can't turn the tide of war with my personal valor. I'm no hero."

The two ribbons on my staff glowed as I began weaving a spell on its tip. The enemy standards bristled with greater fighting spirit than ever before. Barked orders heralded their onslaught.

"But my parents took me in and gave me this name when I had none," I continued. "All this time, they loved, nurtured, and protected me at least as well as any child of theirs by blood."

I struck the butt of my staff on the ground, turning the earth under the feet of the heavily armored enemy knights to mud and freezing it solid before they could start their advance. Overhead, I cast invisible Divine Wind Arrows, targeting the chinks in their armor. Bellows and shrieks filled the air. But such paltry spells were powerless to halt an elite force. The mires were filled in, the ice was melted, and the glow of healing magic showered the wounded knights.

"So, I can't forsake friends, children, and my beastfolk family and stay out of harm's way!" I told Richard as the royal guard stood ready for battle and their war cries echoed in my ears. "The guard is a force to be reckoned with, but you don't know the lay of the land here. You need someone to show you the way. Oh, silly me. I forgot to introduce myself." I winked and gave a respectful bow. "I am Allen, son of the ever-compassionate Ellyn and Nathan of the wolf clan, and I will be your guide to purgatory. Do you have any objections, Your Highness, Lord Richard Leinster?"

The vice commander was speechless and his knights stunned. But soon, they all broke into laughter. Their mirth spread to the whole company and then to the whole force. The enemy advance slowed ever so slightly—perhaps we had confused them.

"You're an utter fool, Allen," my older friend said with evident difficulty. "No wonder Lydia likes you. Now, would you mind leading the way?"

"No, of course not," I replied, smiling.

"I'm truly...truly grateful. Knights of the royal guard!"

“We are the sword that defends the kingdom! We are the shield that defends the kingdom!” the knights chanted, banging on their breastplates in unison as they drew swords, hefted spears, raised shields, and deployed spells on staves. “We are knights who aid the weak!”

Not bad at all.

A grin spread across my face unbidden.

The red-haired nobleman drew his sword and bellowed, “Now, forward! It’s time I showed you what Duke Leinster’s eldest son can do!”

“A Firebird right out of the gate, then,” I said, nodding sagely. “Be my guest.”

“Don’t tease! You know I can’t cast it!” Richard grinned as he vaulted the makeshift barricade and broke into a run. Four massive fireballs raced ahead of him.

I sprinted toward the rebel line after him, casting spells of my own as I went. The forty-six knights chosen for this desperate rescue mission followed. The remaining knights advanced as well, and the militia and volunteers with them, launching a burst of covering fire. Offensive spells tore into the enemy ranks one after another, and fierce winds gusted through the plaza.

The scarlet and azure ribbons on my staff gleamed as though to cheer me on.

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. Long time no see. It's been five months—yes, five. Not the usual four. While writing this volume, I came down with the worst cold and sore throat of my life, and that cost me an extra month. I'm so sorry. I plan to take better care of my health from now on.

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although I've revised about ninety percent of it. I continue to test the limits of the word "revision."

In terms of content, this volume ends on quite the cliff-hanger. But don't worry—so will every other volume in part two. (What?)

The strengths and weaknesses of each leading lady are starting to become apparent, and they'll only grow clearer from now on. The coming volumes will delve into the natures of the Ducal Houses of Howard, Leinster, and Lebufera. It will be a big departure from part one, so I should be able to show you different sides of the cast.

All that I can say for certain is that a particular red-haired knight, whose popularity probably got a sudden, significant boost from this volume, will continue to rise in readers' estimations. He isn't a Leinster for nothing.

Now, I have an announcement to make! A manga adaptation is running in the web magazine *Shonen Ace plus*! Tamura Muto's artwork makes the story so much fun and Tina and Ellie simply adorable, so please give it a read. I promise you'll find it relaxing.

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

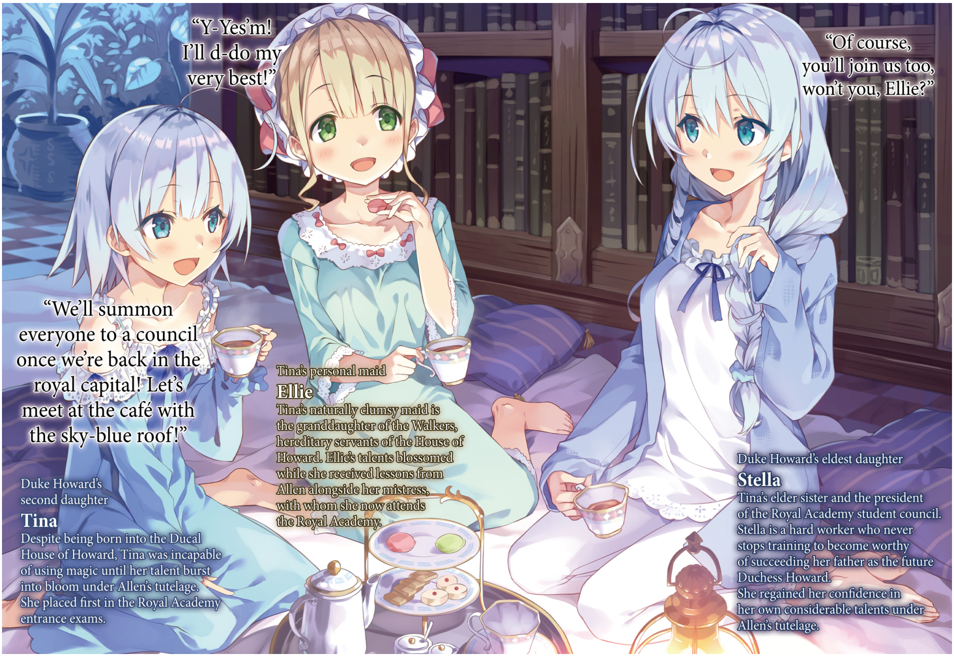
My editor. I caused you so much trouble by getting sick at the end of last year. I promise to work as hard as I can while still putting my health first, and I look forward to working with you again.

The illustrator, cura. I caused a lot of trouble for you too, and I'm extremely sorry. I couldn't suppress an exclamation when I saw your cover illustration of Caren. It could be a movie poster!

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough, and I look forward to seeing you again. The next volume will focus on a certain scaredy-cat.

Riku Nanano

"Have you had enough yet? If you keep pushing your luck, I won't hold ba—"
"That's quite enough of that. You too, Toneri. Any objections?"
Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
5


"Y-Yes'm! I'll d-do my very best!"
"Of course, you'll join us too, won't you, Ellie?"
"We'll summon everyone to a council once we're back in the royal capital! Let's meet at the café with the sky-blue roof!"

Duke Howard's second daughter

Tina

Despite being born into the Ducal House of Howard, Tina was incapable of using magic until her talent burst into bloom under Allen's tutelage. She placed first in the Royal Academy entrance exams.

Tina's personal maid

Ellie

Tina's naturally clumsy maid is the granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants of the House of Howard. Ellie's talents blossomed while she received lessons from Allen alongside her mistress, with whom she now attends the Royal Academy.

Duke Howard's eldest daughter

Stella

Tina's elder sister and the president of the Royal Academy student council. Stella is a hard worker who never stops training to become worthy of succeeding her father as the future Duchess Howard. She regained her confidence in her own considerable talents under Allen's tutelage.

“Have at you!”
“Is that any way to speak to your own mother?!”

Duke Leinster’s eldest daughter

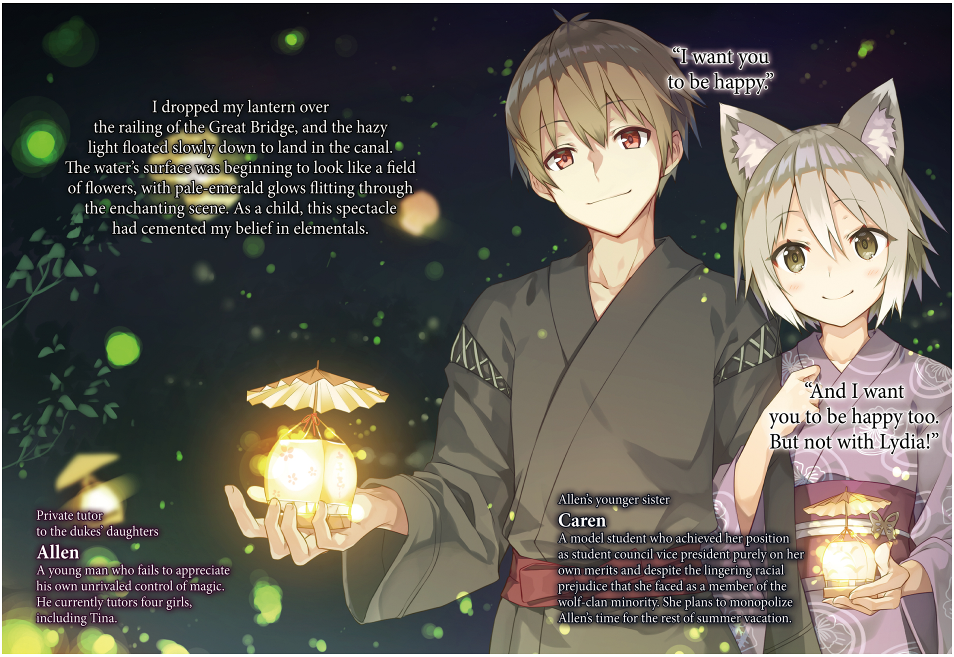
Lydia

The Lady of the Sword has been the albatross around Allen’s neck ever since they both enrolled in the Royal Academy. Lydia is brilliant, gorgeous, and the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman. She currently serves as the princess’s personal guard after being promoted from her position as court sorceress.

Duchess Leinster

Lisa

Lydia and Lynne’s mother is widely regarded as holding supreme authority over the Ducal House of Leinster. She dotes on Allen as though he were her own son and often uses harsh words to light a fire under her unassertive daughter.



I dropped my lantern over the railing of the Great Bridge, and the hazy light floated slowly down to land in the canal. The water's surface was beginning to look like a field of flowers, with pale-emerald glows flitting through the enchanting scene. As a child, this spectacle had cemented my belief in elementals.

"I want you to be happy."
"And I want you to be happy too. But not with Lydia!"

Private tutor
to the dukes' daughters
Allen
A young man who fails to appreciate his own unrivaled control of magic. He currently tutors four girls, including Tina.

Allen's younger sister
Caren
A model student who achieved her position as student council vice president purely on her own merits and despite the lingering racial prejudice that she faced as a member of the wolf-clan minority. She plans to monopolize Allen's time for the rest of summer vacation.

Private Tutor to the
Duke's Daughter

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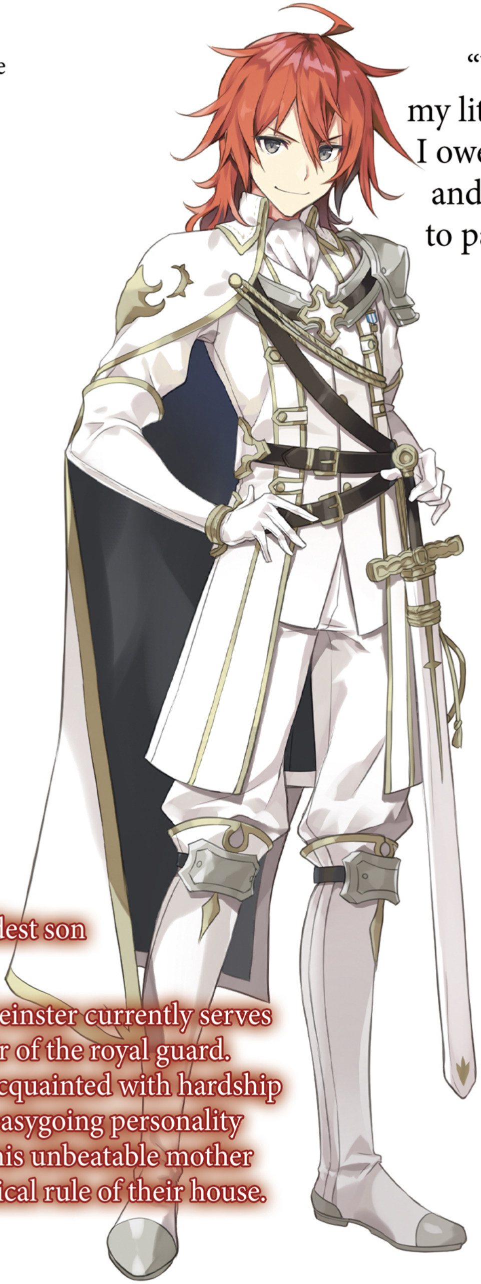

"You saved my little sister's life! I owe you for that, and I was raised to pay my debts."

Duke Leinster's eldest son

Richard

The future Duke Leinster currently serves as vice commander of the royal guard. Richard is better acquainted with hardship than his friendly, easygoing personality lets on, thanks to his unbeatable mother and sisters' tyrannical rule of their house.

5

Author
Riku Nanano

Illustrator
cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Lightning Wolf and Upheaval in the Kingdom

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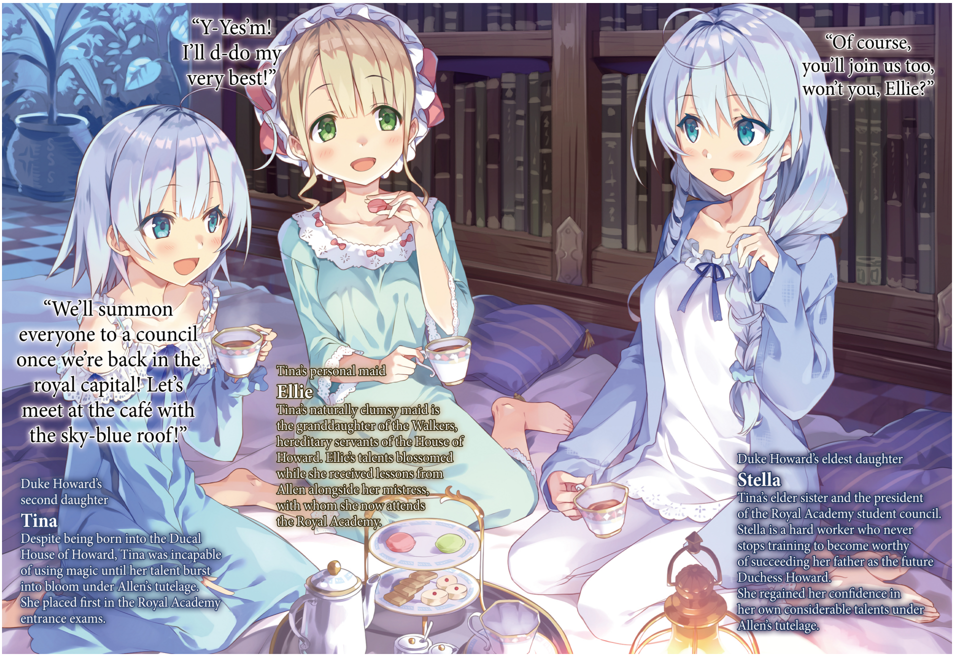
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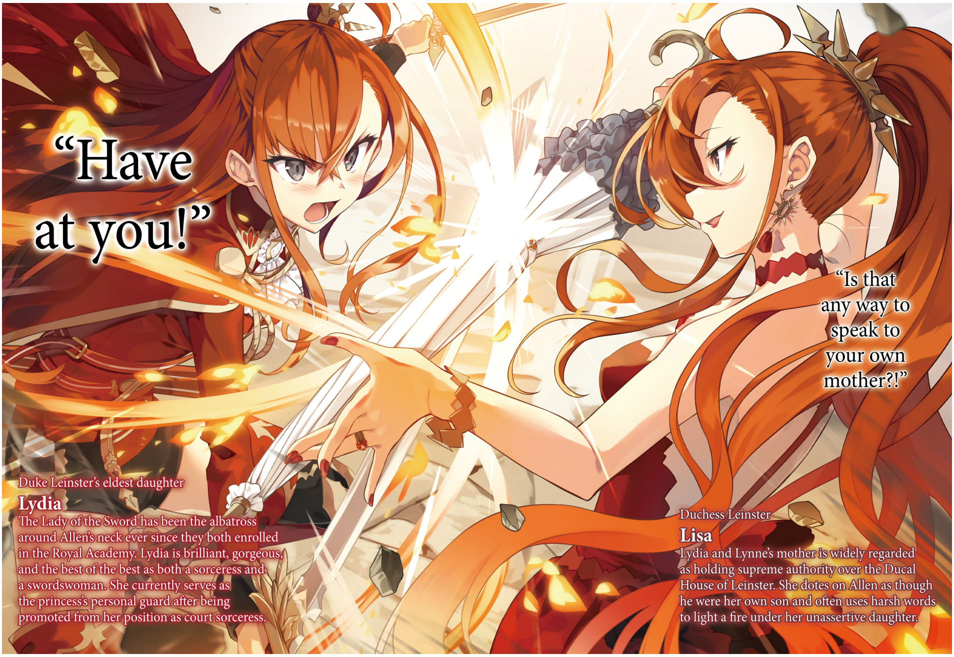
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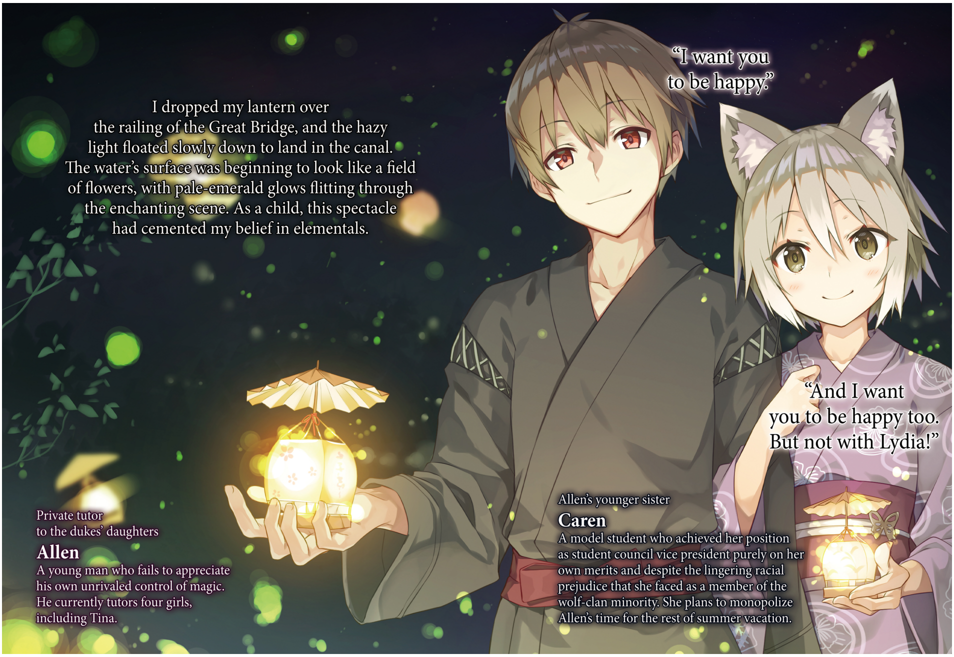

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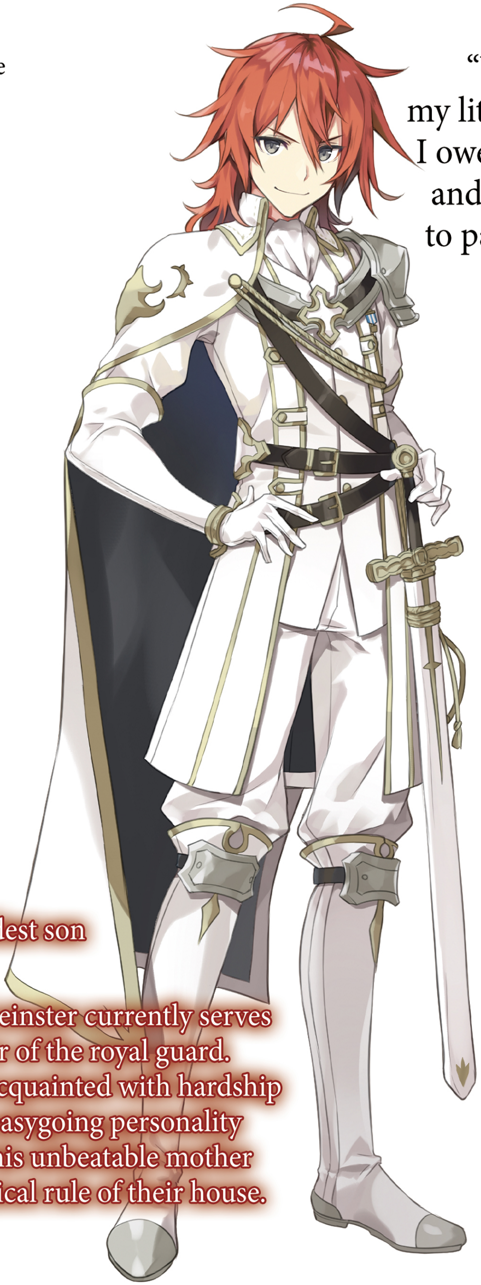

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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 5
by Riku Nanano

Translated by William Varteresian
Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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